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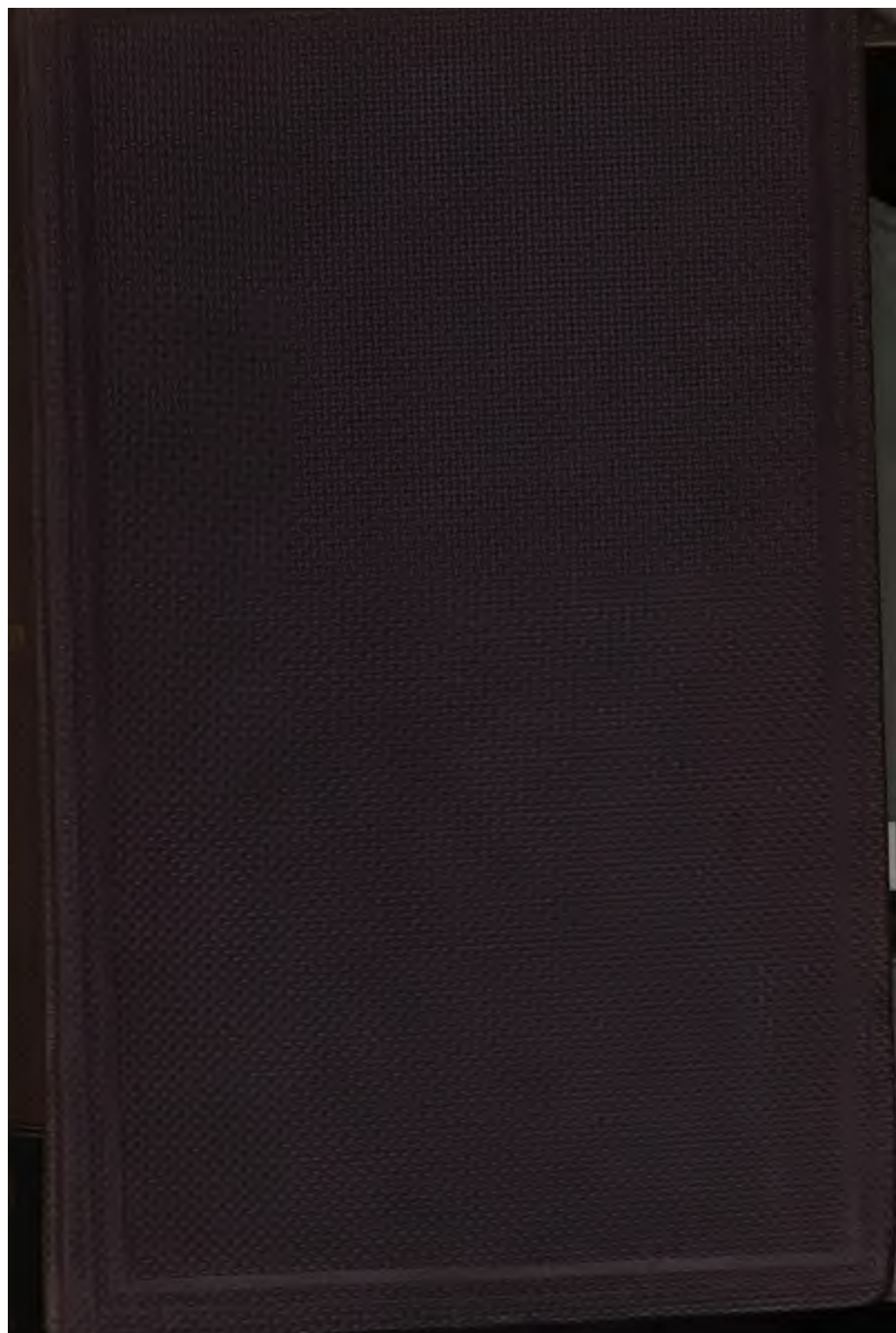
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RIGHT OR WRONG.

BY

GERALDINE E. JEWSBURY,

AUTHOR OF

"CONSTANCE HERBERT," "MARIAN WITHERS,"

&c. &c.

"Would'st shape a noble life? Then cast
Out of thy mind the vexed Past;
And tho' somewhat be lost and gone,
Yet do thou act as if new-born."

GOETHE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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RIGHT OR WRONG.

CHAPTER I.

IF the vicomte had hoped to have intervals of respite from his aunt's presence, he was sorely mistaken.

That exemplary lady installed herself, as she expressed it, *au chévet de son lit*, with an interminable piece of knitting, for she had frequented the circle of Madame de Maintenon, and held by her example. When Madame de Hyères was not saying her prayers she discoursed on the duty of marriage, and exhorted her nephew to consider seriously the advantages of marrying Mademoiselle de Beauséant with a dowry of

a hundred thousand crowns, who, though not of the great nobility, was still of good family.

The vicomte could not always sleep, nor feign to sleep, and the constant click of his aunt's knitting needles, and the tones of her sharp, imperious voice, always raised in behalf of either devotion or matrimony, was penance enough for the sins of his lifetime, at least so he thought.

A week passed on in this manner; Marguerite came into his room for a few moments every morning whilst his aunt was safe at mass. Her manner was cold and reserved, but she made neither question nor complaint, nor did she evince the slightest sign of petulance or ill humour. The inadvertent avowal of the vicomte that his father had long been dead, revealed a tissue of falsehood which she was only waiting for an opportunity to unravel.

The old lady had come resolved that her nephew should marry Mademoiselle de Beau-

sèant, and she sat down before her design as resolutely as a general who blockades a city; she was a woman of a fixed idea, and when once a purpose entered her mind she had not a conception that it was possible to forego it.

The literal fulfilment of our wishes may prove the very reverse of what we expected, but it is quite certain that perseverance has an almost omnipotent power to bring them to pass; sooner or later it accomplishes the fact, if we can only hold to our purpose long enough, and firmly enough.

At first the vicomte chafed—out of very contradiction he desired the presence of Marguerite more earnestly than ever he had done before. But the long days had many hours; he was still quite unable to move without assistance, and he was perforce obliged to lie still.

Gradually his ears began to receive the words of his aunt. Mixed as they were

with adroit flattery they were no sooner listened to than they began to take effect. The old lady was clever; she had all a French woman's adroitness, and was not without a spice of caustic wit that made her amusing when she chose. Her stories about Madame de Maintenon and her court—the squabbles about arm-chairs and foot-stools—her endless genealogies and stories, sharpened with delicate malice, became gradually amusing to him. She never lost sight of her purpose; all her stories, all her speeches tended to one point, the necessity that the vicomte should marry as became his rank, and restore the honours of his house. By degrees it seemed as if all the history of France centered in the family of Valambrosa, and the vicomte began to think that if not actually the brother of the sun and moon he was, at any rate, a much greater person than he had thought.

The old lady continued to ply her knitting, and redoubled her efforts as she espied some signs of success.

By degrees the vicomte began to think that lawful matrimony was a *kismet* that sooner or later inevitably overtook every man who had a noble name to support, and to become reconciled to the idea of Mademoiselle de Beausèant and her dowry.

Léonce, on his part, seconded the old lady's views; on him too certain new ideas were dawning. He considered that if his master married he would not only become a personage of more importance, but that he would require an intendant of his household, and who so proper for that place of trust as Léonce, his faithful attendant and privy counsellor! Decidedly Léonce's own fortunes seemed to lie on the side of virtue and Madame de Hyères; from that moment Marguerite's fate was decided.

Gradually, but steadily, the vicomte was pressed forwards on the road his aunt wished him to go; every day he found himself more

inclined to entertain the notion of letting himself be married, especially as all had been arranged so as to give him no sort of trouble.

Marguerite was the only difficulty; she would make a scene; she would make herself very inconvenient to M. le vicomte, as Léonce adroitly insinuated, and Marguerite became a disagreeable association of ideas.

All this while Marguerite herself was certainly neither gracious nor pleasant; and the vicomte began to dread the sight of her; and to wish heartily that she would hear mass every morning, as well as his aunt.

Madame de Hyères had not been twenty-four hours in the house, before she had learned all there was to be learned about Marguerite, but she kept her knowledge like hidden treasure, to be brought forwards at the right moment.

One morning, when she deemed her plans ripe, she entered her nephew's room

earlier than usual, Marguerite was adjusting his pillow. She looked up as Madame de Hyères came in, and they stood face to face.

Madame de Hyères drew herself up, and surveyed Marguerite with the indescribable haughtiness of a great lady. Marguerite stood her scrutiny with haughty composure, and kept her place.

“Who is that young person?” asked Madame de Hyères, turning to her nephew.

Marguerite did not speak, the vicomte kept silence, and Léonce stood by, feeling that the crisis had come.

“Will you tell me, my nephew, who is this who has taken my place beside you?”

Marguerite stood with her hand resting on the pillow—quite silent, and entirely unabashed by the lady’s looks.

“Perhaps, child, you will tell me yourself, by what right you intrude yourself, so unbecomingly and without any sense of

modesty, in the apartment of my nephew?"

"M. le vicomte can tell you, madame, if he is so minded, and if you have the right to enquire."

"What insolence!" exclaimed Madame de Hyères; "speak instantly, my nephew, or I leave your house for ever."

Marguerite's eyes were fixed intently on the vicomte, who felt sufficiently uncomfortable beneath their searching gaze.

"Mademoiselle lives in this house—as—as—"

"His wife," quietly added Léonce.

"That cannot be true; my nephew cannot so far have forgotten what belongs to a gentleman—nor the respect he owes to me."

The vicomte still kept an uncomfortable silence; he felt it more difficult than he expected to avow the truth to Marguerite.

Marguerite gave the vicomte a look of intense contempt, and said slowly and distinctly :

“M. le vicomte married me;—that is the reason why I live here. He did not wish you to know; that is the reason why I have been kept out of sight.”

Madame de Hyères appeared as though she had not heard, and again addressed her nephew, who said, awkwardly:—

“Well, it is quite true that I went through a ceremony with her; she wished to believe herself my wife and a vicomtesse.”

“And is it not so?” said Marguerite, with a calmness that was ominous of danger.

“Truly, no! it was a form I submitted to entirely to pacify your scruples. It was a false marriage altogether, as you might have known had you not been wilfully deceived.

The vicomte looked at Léonce for corroboration.

“I had the honour to read the service myself; Mademoiselle Marguerite flatters my skill in disguise.”

Madame de Hyères seemed visibly relieved, but she said :

“It was an entirely superfluous piece of condescension ; no young woman of her class could have been otherwise than honoured by the vicomte’s regard. The presumption of even dreaming of marriage is properly punished ; but if you still wish to retain that young woman in the house, you will permit me to order my carriage and depart.”

She bestowed a look of contempt on Marguerite and swept out of the room.

“Miguel, is what you said just now true ? I entreat you to tell me if it be.”

Marguerite spoke quite calmly, almost gently.

“Yes, Marguerite, it is quite true!—surely you must have found out long ere this, even if you believed it at the time, that I could never have seriously intended to marry you. Come, be sensible—I dare not offend my aunt ; but you will always possess my unalterable

affection, and I will endow your future with any sum that you will ask ; you shall find me generous—and do not be unforgiving ; consider how much I loved you.”

Marguerite’s eyes flashed, but she only said :

“ If you can restore my father, I will go away, and you shall never hear of me again. Was *that* too your work ? ”

“ If your father be still alive he shall be liberated ; but Marguerite, do not look so deadly—say that you forgive me for the motive’s sake.”

“ But I do *not* forgive you ; I despise you ; only I despise myself yet more for having loved you. It was nobly done to use so much skill to deceive a woman who believed you blindly ! But my father—see that you restore him to me, or I will apply for justice to the King himself.”

She spoke with a concentrated rage that gave a sense of uneasiness both to the vicomte and to his coadjutor.

“Good heavens! what a tigress!” said the vicomte, drawing breath as the door closed behind her.

“Madame means mischief,” said Léonce; “it will be as well to obtain her father’s liberty, or she will make a scandal, unless, indeed, you send her to keep him company.”

“No, let her have her father, though I should think he must be dead by this time. How handsome she looked! Mademoiselle de Beauséant has red hair and freckles. Give me my portfolio.”

The vicomte scrawled a few lines to the minister, and bid Léonce take it.

“You are quite in earnest that I should succeed?”

“Yes; if the old man is alive let him come out.”

“Very well. Has monsieur any further orders?”

“No, except dispatch.”

The vicomte was ill-at-ease. The blow had been struck ; there had been little or nothing of a scene ; Marguerite was as determined to go away as he could be to send her, and yet he felt disturbed and unhappy ; he found that Marguerite had more empire over him than he had known ; he could not bear to let her go, now that he was delivered from all fear of inconvenience.

Madame de Hyères resumed her place beside his couch, and made no allusion to the scene that had recently passed ; it was enough that she had crushed the young woman back to her original nothingness. Whither she would go, or what was to become of her, was beneath her notice.

CHAPTER II.

ONE day, as Madame Bobbinet was knitting at the door of the house, a *fiacre* drove up, completely filling the street.

“Gracious me! Mademoiselle Marguerite, is that you come back, and is that the poor old gentleman? I would not have known him! He *is* changed, to be sure!”

“Hush, hush, Madame Bobbinet, I am come back to live with you if you will let me. Is our old room at liberty?”

“Yes, to be sure; I have kept it always for you, as the good papa bade me. He said you would come back, and that I was to be ready for you. He was took dreadful when he heard you were gone.’

Marguerite seemed scarcely to heed her. She was busied about her father, who, paralytic and helpless, had shrunk to the dimensions of a child. The coachman lifted him in his arms, and carried him up stairs after Madame Bobbinet, who led the way. Marguerite followed with the child, and a small box, which she carried in her other hand.

When they reached the old apartment everything was as she had left it two years ago. The coachman deposited his burden tenderly in the arm-chair; Marguerite paid him, and he went away. Madame Bobbinet would have asked a multitude of questions, but there was that in Marguerite's face that deterred her. She silently aided her to light a fire and prepare some food for the child and the poor old man.

Marguerite went about mechanically, doing all she had formerly done; but looking so

strange and stern that Madame Bobbinet was quite afraid. It was, as she said, "like a dead person who had come to life."

"Thank you, Madame Bobbinet—good night. I want nothing more—you are very good. Recollect if any one should come to ask for me I am not here—you have not heard of me."

"To be sure, to be sure—I shall not be taken in again, I warrant. But is there nothing more you will want?"

"No."

Madame Bobbinet's wooden *sabots* were heard tapping down the stairs. Marguerite was left to herself.

Before Madame Bobbinet slept that night she had dispatched a messenger to the address Paul had given her.

"It is a strange business, Tom-Tom, is it not?" said she, as she caressed her favourite—a strange business, I understand

nothing about it ; but when the good papa comes he will set it all right, and now you and I will go to bed."

CHAPTER III.

PAUL mounted the almost interminable stairs; his veins seemed filled with molten lead, and his limbs were so heavy he could scarcely drag them along. He had had to pause for strength; before he dared to knock a voice bade him enter.

In the centre of the room, Marguerite stood, washing clothes; her face was set and stern, but it softened at the sight of Paul.

“You came here once before when we were in trouble. I thought you would have come again.”

“I did come again, but you had left. I

heard last night you were here, and I came to find you."

Paul spoke low, and his words were almost inarticulate from emotion.

"You are very good, sit down;" and she placed a chair for him whilst she cleared away her washing mug and hung the wet clothes upon a line at the other end of the room.

Paul had time to recover his composure, and to look round him.

A thin, shrunk, paralytic old man sat beside the fire-place; he was completely idiotic. How old he might be it was impossible to guess; his hair had fallen off, his teeth were gone, it was a death's head covered with a wrinkled skin; the eyes were dull and glazed, like those of a corpse; how animal life contrived to find refuge in such a ruinous dwelling was a pitiable wonder. He was dressed in an old, patched great-coat; his lower limbs covered with a bed-rug; unable to support

himself, he was secured to his chair by a strap passed round the middle of his body.

A beautiful baby was on the ground at his feet.

Marguerite having finished what she had to do, came and sat down beside Paul; the child began to cry, and Marguerite lifted it to her knee.

There was no trace of shame or embarrassment, but a stern, grave sorrow; she did not look at Paul, her eyes had a fixed, onward, absent gaze.

"Tell me, Marguerite, all that has happened to you, and let me help you."

"It is strange that I should believe in any one again, but I believe in you. I don't know that I can tell you all that has happened; there is much that I do not know myself; but you see there my work," pointing to the old man; "if it had

not been for me my father would not have been there."

"Marguerite, do not reproach yourself too much; no one who sees you could believe you weak or wicked."

"It does not signify what I am," said Marguerite, impatiently; "I have been the cause of all his suffering, the mischief is none the less because I did not intend it; besides, if I had been strong and courageous it could not have happened. I was deceived, but I also deceived myself; I was glad to believe what I was told, and that makes all my shame. For the rest, I believed I was married; I did not know the ceremony was false, I never doubted about that; but I knew my father was in prison, and what right had I to think about marrying and being happy whilst he was there suffering; oh, nothing has happened to me but what I deserve; the curse on a disobedient child."

Marguerite, you shall not blame yourself so savagely; I know in part what has happened to you, you have been the victim of a plot you could neither escape nor unravel; you don't know the diabolical pains that were taken to ensnare you."

"That is possible; the vicomte did wrong, but it is not with him I have to do. I know my own weakness; if I had not been a coward—I was afraid of losing him—at least I should have been guiltless; I don't want to be excused. I wish to have all the blame."

"But my child, you do not deserve it all. When did you find out you were deceived?"

"His aunt came to him when he was lying wounded, and talked to him of a great marriage. She found out about me, and came to me, and when I would not believe her, she asked him in my presence, and he could not deny that he was not married to me; he did not want me to

leave him, for he loved me, especially at the last. He was very angry, but he got my father set at liberty, and when I saw him I felt what a wretch I had been—poor old man!—if he had not had a daughter he might still have been strong and happy.”

“And what do you count on doing?”

“To take care of him, and to work; you once said you knew a lady who would take all the lace and embroidery I could make; is she alive still? Will she still become a customer?”

At this moment the poor old paralytic lifted his head, and opening his mouth frightfully wide, uttered a series of discordant yells. Paul started, and covered his ears, so horrible were the sounds.

The child began to cry.

“He is hungry,” said Marguerite, getting up. “It is the only way in which he can make known his wants; poor father, I have

nothing good to give him." Whilst she spoke she made a panada of bread and water, and a morsel of sugar, and then passing her arm round his neck, she fed him like an infant. When he had done his head fell again upon his breast, and he slept.

"But what a horrible life for you, Marguerite."

"Do not pity me; I wish to suffer; the more the better; besides, nothing hurts me."

"Tell me, have you nothing to live upon but what you earn?"

"No, nothing; he would have given me money, but I would not take it; so you see I must work hard that these may not suffer."

Paul was astonished at her courage, though it was too much like despair to re-assure him; she had not come to the sensation of her own pain yet; she was

still stunned from the blow, and he dreaded the moment when her stoicism should become human suffering.

“Marguerite, let me be your friend. I will try to deserve to be so. All the lace you can make I will dispose of. You will let me come again?”

“You are very good—yes—you are like a father for me.”

Paul rose; Marguerite’s eyes had still the fixed absent gaze they never lost; except whilst waiting upon her father. Almost before Paul reached the door she had turned to resume the occupation he had interrupted.

Paul went away feeling like a man who had awakened from a dream, in which he had seen the means to scale the firmament, and found himself standing without even a ladder to mount a hay-rick. Everything had fallen so differently to what he had imagined. He had prepared himself

to find her heart full of love for another, and with that he would have had sympathy; he expected to find her overwhelmed with shame and indignation, and he was prepared to raise her in her own esteem; and his hope was to soothe and comfort her. But Marguerite was not in love, nor in any frenzy; she was perfectly calm and reasonable. Cartouche, the famous robber, told the priest who attended him, that the *first* blow on the wheel, was the *last* that was felt, which is as true in great moral shocks as in physical ones. After awhile, Paul did not allow himself to be cast down; he accepted Marguerite as she was, and with the abnegation of true love he tried to change *himself* instead of her; the *patience* of true love is the strongest force in life, it can wear down Time itself.

Paul loved Marguerite, though what he intended to do either with her or with

himself he did not know, his only idea was to melt down his life to help hers in any way that he could make her accept help; to nourish her life with his own life.

CHAPTER IV.

ONE morning, some months afterwards, Marguerite having settled her father in his chair, and laid the child to sleep, was seated at her lace-pillow, when the door opened and the vicomte stood before her. Marguerite rose and confronted him, but without either anger or surprise, and waited for him to speak.

“Marguerite! I am come—” he paused and faltered beneath the calm, cold, fixed look that met him.

“Marguerite, I am come to find you—I cannot live without you—I love you; come back to me if you have any pity.”

He fell on his knees at her feet, and would

have taken her hand, but she coldly withdrew it.

“M. le vicomte, you have no right here—I wish you to go away.”

“But, Marguerite, I love you, and you only; if I deceived you, it was the only stratagem by which I could hope to win you; have pity on me, on our child, on yourself,—for you cannot have lost all love for me, and return—let your father come too; the past is past, it is of no use to regret it. I love you so much, and those who love much have much forgiven to them; I heard *that* read in church where I used to go to meet you and wait for you;—oh, Marguerite, have you forgotten those days? You are the first woman I ever loved—you will be the last. Marguerite, come back, you are my wife in the sight of all that is holy; till you left me I did not know how you held my very soul with yours. Marguerite, you *did* love me once, it cannot all have gone out.—Oh!

Marguerite, look at me—let me have one look from you, such as I used to meet when I came home to you after absence; Marguerite, I would never leave you more.—Come back, only come back, Marguerite!”

Marguerite seemed scarcely to hear this impassioned appeal;—her face was stern and her eyes looked straight out before her.

“Rise, M. le vicomte,” said she, coldly and gravely; there was not an inflexion in her calm, steady voice. “If I ever loved you, I have ceased to do so. I shall never return to you, and I do not wish you to come again to me; the child is mine—my father is mine—you have no share in either—look at that old man.” She moved aside and pointed to the chair where the paralytic sat, and which the vicomte, in his agitation, had not observed; “I am no longer one you ever knew—I

am dead—what you have done you have done—go away and leave me.”

“Marguerite, I cannot leave you—I will not. I did not intend that harm to your father—he shall have the best physician in Paris. Only speak to me like a human being, not as if you were turned to stone.”

“How would you have me speak? I am stone.”

The vicomte, still kneeling, tried to grasp Marguerite’s dress; she disengaged herself, and, turning her back on the vicomte, busied herself with her father, taking no notice of anything besides. The vicomte found his position intolerable—he was enraged.

“Marguerite, do not turn my love to hatred. You cannot mock me with impunity. Are then my tears, my humility, my regrets, of no avail, that you front with that proud cold face? You know my power—you shall fear me if you don’t

love me. I will conquer your scorn, at least."

"M. le vicomte," said Marguerite, turning round to him, "this conduct is unbecoming. You are a great lord, and not an actor in a theatre; besides, you choose your part ill. You knelt to me once before—the same turn does not succeed twice. I have nothing to say to you; I have not reproached you; I do not lay my own blame on you; but as a man of good breeding, you cannot stay where you have been requested to withdraw, nor can you continue to seek a woman who has told you that your persistence is displeasing."

There was a slight accent of contempt in these last words; the vicomte felt it—he was pale with rage.

"Very well, madam, I depart; but you have loved me too much not to regret me hereafter, though you may pretend to despise me at this moment; recollect that

I am the father of your child. Oh, madame, I hold my place in your memory by too many ties to fear you can ever forget me; and cold and proud as it pleases you to seem now, I recollect all the avowals of everlasting, never-changing love you have sworn to me. It comes in your part as woman to be false and changeable. You may wish to forget the past, but you cannot alter it. I leave you, madame, to the new lover by whom you have replaced me. He may be happy, but he can never flatter himself to be the first whom you have made so."

With a profound bow, and sweeping the floor with his hat, the vicomte quitted the room.

A flush mounted up to Marguerite's forehead at the last words of the vicomte, and a look of indignant scorn flashed from her eyes as the door closed behind him, but it faded away quickly, and she knelt down before the crucifix with her rosary.

“Merciful Mother, let it be accepted for a portion of my punishment,” were the only words that would have been audible to a bystander.

She resumed her former grave, composed aspect, and continued her lace-making, which the entrance of the vicomte had interrupted.

She was not again molested by the vicomte. But though in appearance she was calm, his last words rankled painfully in her heart like the sharp edge of the crucifix she wore on her bosom, “the lover by whom you have no doubt replaced me.” That he, towards whom she had shown such wild idolatry, should so easily believe she could ever love any other man showed such utter want of understanding of all she had felt and been for him, that it gave a sick pang to her despair, worse to endure than even the self-reproach under which she had almost sunk.

CHAPTER V.

It was not long before Paul discovered that the part he had assigned to himself, in reference to Marguerite, was beyond the strength of human nature to fulfil. Marguerite's pale set face always became more gentle, if not more glad, at the sight of him. She spoke freely to him, leaned upon him for counsel, took all the comfort his devotion to her gave, like the sunshine of heaven, as a matter of course.

She was raised above all fear of want by the orders Paul had brought to her for embroidered vestments and altar-lace, for which he also brought ample payment. He watched over her and over her child, to do

them good ; but so quietly and unobtrusively that Marguerite never gave, and Paul certainly never claimed, any thanks.

Paul's love grew stronger every day. With unconscious egotism Marguerite used up his life. She liked to see him, to have the comfort of his wise counsel and tender strength ; but she never dreamed of the inner life that flowed into everything he said or did, making it like the gift of God.

When she first discovered the vicomte's baseness, her idol was shattered at once, but the shock had been too strong. She seemed to bear up with noble fortitude, but her whole nature was paralyzed ; she was torpid, and past feeling ; the fibre which had for the moment quivered under the taunting words of the vicomte soon ceased to vibrate, and the pain merged into the dull undistinguished weight which pressed on all her faculties, and numbed her life.

Paul partly understood this state of things ;

he had infinite patience and sympathy, but he was also a man, and a man cannot be superhuman, he cannot "give ALL looking for nothing again;" and Paul looked for the time when Marguerite should be comforted, and sensible of his love for her. He did not expect her to love him as he loved her; but he hoped—his hopes began moderately, but they always faded into unlimited possibilities.

By degrees her gentle, placid, blameless indifference became beyond his strength to bear, though there was nothing he had any right to quarrel with.

The poor paralytic father continued in the same state,—a mystery of life in death where the result was stagnation.

The only bright life-like thing was the child; it grew and thrived, but even Marguerite's love for her child had shared the torpor of the rest of her sensibility; she was grave, punctual, unimpassioned in her care for it.

At first Paul felt a strange repulsion to the child, it seemed to him the incarnation of the father's sin. Marguerite was scarcely enough to save it from his hatred. But one day he came when it was ill; its plaintive wail went to his heart, he took it into his arms, he succeeded in hushing its cries, and it slept in his bosom; "a spring of love gushed in his heart, and he blessed it unaware."

From that day he loved the child, and the child loved Paul. It laughed, and crowed, and screamed with delight when he appeared.

It was Paul who made it speak its first articulate word, and Paul always carried it abroad for air whenever he came; beside this child he was able to breathe; the tension of suppressed passion was relaxed, and Juana, as Marguerite had named her, cooled, with her innocent touch and baby fingers, the fever that was eating out his life.

Paul had resolved never to let Marguerite

know his passion, never to ask her to return it, but the insidious approach of disease weakened the strong will, which had hitherto kept guard over his secret.

One day, he came at the usual time to visit Marguerite; but the exertion of mounting the stairs exhausted him; he stood awhile on the landing to recover himself, but Marguerite had heard his step and opened the door. She was startled and shocked at the aspect he presented.

“Oh, Paul! what have you done? what is the matter? you were quite well when you were here last week, have you been ill?”

Paul shrank as though a knife had stabbed him, but he took the hand she extended to lead him in. It was the first time his hand had come in contact with hers. A shiver of uncontrollable emotion passed through him.

“Paul, what is it?” said Marguerite, in alarm; he did not reply, but raised his

eyes to hers, with a look that left little more to say.

“Marguerite, are you then so blind? do you not see that I love you?”

Marguerite, troubled and agitated at the sight of this emotion in one whom she had looked upon as beyond human passions, did not reply, unless the instinct with which she sought to withdraw her hand might be so considered.

“Marguerite, I had but my life to give you, and you have had it. I did not intend to tell you, but I have broken down. Marguerite, I love you, and I must die, for I cannot live thus; to see you so calm, and unconscious, and benevolent, has made me mad; at least, you know now that I am a human being, you can never more be ignorant of all I endure, of all I have endured. Since the day I first beheld you I have loved you. Marguerite, give me some answer, even if it be to say you hate me!”

He felt the hand he held struggle to withdraw. Marguerite turned away with a sense of pity and deep trouble.

“Paul! do not break my heart; you, so good, so strong, so noble, to humble yourself to me, it is not right; you must not, you are ill, you know not what you say. Oh, Paul! I told you I was a wretch, and now you see I said true. I bring evil on all who do me good; first on my father, and now on you. Oh, Paul, forgive me and say you do not mean it.”

“Do not mean what?” said Paul, sharply, in a tone that made her tremble, so much it revealed of the fierce passions which had slipped their chain, and were raging in his soul.

“Do you want me to say that I do not love you? to unsay the one word that gives me breath when I am strangled? Marguerite, I love you, do not trifle with me.”

“Oh, Paul, Paul! what can I do? what

would you have me to do? I have thought of you ~~as~~ of a guardian angel, I never thought of you ~~as~~ a mortal man; oh, let me be what I have been, a creature whom you have gathered up and saved, when she had been cast forth to perish. I could not have lived these last months, if it had not been for you; oh, you have been so good, do not make yourself less by talking of love for me, who do not deserve it, who never could have deserved the love of a man like you; besides, I cannot undo the past."

"Why do you speak of the past?" asked Paul, furiously. "What is the past to me?"

"But the past has my life buried in it. I am a woman turned to stone within. Have not you seen that?"

"I believe you—at least you are telling me the truth when you say you feel like stone for me. But *is* it so? Have I only been too sudden, too vehement? Have I frightened you?"

“Paul, forgive me. Do not I suffer also? This morning I had you to lean upon, to trust in, and now I have not a friend in the world, for you will hate me now. But I dare not make-believe, nor repay all your benefits in a false coin; I would rather be a bankrupt and seem ungrateful.”

“At least you might have spared me that word—but I see how it is—you are right and I am wrong. Farewell, Marguerite,—nay, let me go now, I will come again when I am stronger.”

Paul made a sublime effort to control himself—to leave Marguerite without a remorse in her heart for what she had done. He passed his hand over his forehead; his features were relaxed and pale; his whole countenance bore the impress of the violent struggle that had been going on. He placed his hands upon her shoulders and gave one long look upon her face, and said gently :

“Forget all this; let me be to you as I always have been. I will come again when I can. Do not let the child forget me—do not reproach yourself—you have done right.”

Breaking off his gaze, he turned abruptly and left the room.

How he reached the street, or found his way back to his convent, Paul never knew. For many days he lay unconscious of all around him. He was supposed by the brothers of the convent to have caught a malignant fever, which was very prevalent at that season in the poor quarters of Paris; it was the worst species of typhus, and for three weeks no hopes were entertained of his life.

At length Paul was pronounced out of danger, but his recovery was very slow, and it was near three months before he was able to go again to Marguerite.

During all this time Marguerite had been suffering great and increasing anxiety.

Receiving no tidings of him she had imagined him to be displeased, and began to reproach herself with ingratitude.

She missed his visits and the thousand unrecorded acts of kindness, which at the time she had scarcely heeded. She felt sorrow at his estrangement, and remorse for the pain she had given him. This sense of pain was the first symptom that life was beginning to return to her heart.

The first day that Paul came after his illness she felt an emotion of gladness to find that illness and not estrangement had caused his absence.

CHAPTER VI.

It may be as well to explain, for the benefit of Protestant readers, that Paul, although a monk, was not a priest; he had not even taken full vows as a monk. In contemplating a union with Marguerite he was, doubtless, highly irregular; his project, if carried out, would render him liable to high ecclesiastical pains and penalties; but it would not constitute sacrilege. For the rest, the discipline of the Couvent des Petits Saint Antoine had been so lax, from time immemorial, that he had little cause to fear scandal, even if his connection with Marguerite were discovered, so long as the fact of marriage was concealed.

Paul had one of those rare natures "at unity with itself;" he was capable of choosing a part, and not only abiding by it, but of imposing silence on the tumultuous multitude of discordant thoughts and conflicting ideas which are the torment of half characters, which keep them halting betwixt two opinions, and drifting along in painful indecision, not so much from tenderness and conscientiousness as from the sordid wish to enjoy all the advantages of two opposite courses.

He recognised the signs of change in Marguerite, and long before she was conscious he saw that life and warmth were slowly returning to that benumbed and stupified heart.

Joyfully as he hailed the dim dawn he had patience to wait, and did not attempt to hasten what he foresaw was coming. Neither by word or look did he show that he recollected the scene before his illness; he left her

to believe it the beginning of delirium. But from the moment the first faint spark of hope revived in his heart, he began to arrange for his future life.

The first thing needful was to settle some method of gaining his living, as, of course, he did not choose to appropriate a single franc of the convent revenues to his own use.

The next thing was to determine his own future relations with the convent. Having once embraced a religious life he did not feel at liberty to draw back. He had, however, been a man before he was a monk; he had his rights as a Human Being which could not be alienated beyond his power to recal.

To conciliate these opposite phases of his life he determined, after much deliberation, to divide his time into two equal portions. Half the year he would spend within the convent, where he would give himself heartily and cordially to the duties of a monk; he felt

confident that into those six months he could throw more vigour and vitality than into the whole twelve of his ordinary existence. All his convent work would have to be compressed into that period. For the other six months of the year he would be a man and a citizen—the husband of Marguerite. In this relation, too, he would, for the time, live perfect and entire, giving no thought for the morrow, nor for the yesterday which was past.

The peculiar quality of Paul's mind enabled him to take this singular resolution without doubt or misgiving; he felt within himself the power to reconcile the two states of life, and to bring the result into a unity which should be good and right. His nature was too healthy and entire to waste its vitality in hesitating scruples.

The great difference between a strong nature and a weak one is, that a strong man is always greater than his actions; he can

organise them, and bring even the most exceptional within his rule of life; he can accept the consequences, and can work even regrettable experiences to some good result. A weak nature is always clogged and impeded by its past hours, and entangled in their consequences. Their life is a series of unreconcilable actions, which harass their master like the demons of an unskilful sorcerer.

Paul having resolved upon the general plan of his future life, had to arrange the details. He was a skilful physician, especially he understood that strange and terrible malady, for the treatment of which the hospital of his order had at first been created.

As a physician, then, amongst the lower classes, he resolved to establish himself. He looked about for a suitable dwelling, and felt a strange pride in becoming once more an ordinary human

being, mixing on natural terms with his fellows.

There was nothing remarkably wonderful in being a physician in an obscure quarter of Paris, nor yet in being married and bringing home his wife; but to Paul, it all had an intense and delicious originality; he was raised in his own eyes—he breathed more freely, and felt as though all the ills of life were under his feet.

For a long time he saw nothing that seemed to realise a home such as he wished for.

At last, after much search, he found a small house in the rue Maubert; it looked gloomy and desolate enough, and had long been uninhabited. It had formerly belonged to an alchemist, who also had the reputation of being a sorcerer, but the more matter-of-fact crimes of poisoning and coining having been brought home to him, he had been burned alive with all judicial terrors and formalities, which in those times made the

execution of capital punishments such dramatic *spectacles*.

The house had lapsed to the crown, and no one had cared to inhabit it; shadowy terrors and traditions of evil deeds clung to its walls, and it was falling into ruin when Paul one day remarked it in the course of his walks.

He went through it, opened the shutters and let daylight into the dreary and damp-stained rooms. The house was detached and stood in a small enclosure, now choked up with rubbish, and overgrown with wild, grey, ragged grass; but there were capabilities about the place which Paul was not slow to perceive.

He obtained possession of it for an almost nominal rent, as well as of all the mouldering relics of furniture and arras which remained exactly as they were at the moment when their last possessor was snatched away by the hands of justice.

Certainly it was a place to try the nerves of a superstitious, or an imaginative person, but Paul took up his abode there full of happy thoughts. An old woman was his only domestic ; she lived in the room at the entrance, and so had secured a means of retreat in case of any invasion, real or supernatural.

He announced himself as a doctor, and continued his habits of going amongst the poor.

By degrees patients able to pay came to him ; amongst others he was called in to visit the wife of a rich grocer in the neighbourhood ; he was successful, and the husband was grateful.

Paul's singular gift of attaching to himself all who came in contact with him, was felt by all his patients ; they looked upon him as a friend whom they had known for years ; his influence was wonderful ; no family secrets were hid from him, few refrained from confiding to him

their personal perplexities ; he had the gift of making those he was with show themselves, without disguise or pretence. His judgment and prudence, and the wonderful faculty he had of reconciling quarrels and conciliating opposing parties, made him almost as much sought after as an arbitrator as a physician. He could fill up the gulf that divided the contending parties by supplying the medium term which neither of them could discern, but which explained them to themselves and to each other, and he could always suggest the motive that was most calculated to act upon the person he was dealing with.

By degrees the dim, desolate-looking house became brighter. It consisted of three rooms on the ground-floor, as many above, and an attic in the roof. A passage ran through the house from the front-door and opened into a small open space, walled round. This vacant space, when Paul first took the house, was

like the garden of the sluggard in Dr. Watts' hymn :

"The thorns and the thistles grew higher and higher,"

and though the most audacious *gamin* in the street would not venture in, that did not hinder all the broken pots, bottles, and kettles of the neighbourhood from being thrown over the discoloured and ruinous walls.

Paul worked with his own hands on this unpromising spot, and by degrees it became beautiful. The walls were repaired and whitewashed, creeping plants and jessamine were trained to cover them. The house was thoroughly purified. Paul gave away the old arras hangings and worm-eaten furniture to those of the poorest of his neighbours whose love of property was stronger than their prejudices. The virtues of paint and whitewash were expended on the house, both within and without.

In all this Paul himself was the chief labourer; though all the neighbours took an interest in the "Doctor's House," and they whose calling lay that way gave him their advice and a good deal of assistance. A glazier, whose child he had cured, asked leave to give him an hour's work in the evenings, after his own day's labour was ended; a grateful carpenter volunteered to repair the floors and wainscots.

The influence of Paul's character told upon the whole neighbourhood, and their zeal to help him was only the type of their improved relations towards each other. If Paul had looked to consequences for the justification of the decision he had taken, he might have found it in the good he had already effected since he resumed his position as a man and a citizen; he had those two great gifts, the faculty of ruling others, and of making himself beloved.

Meanwhile, Marguerite, little dreaming of all that was being prepared for her, felt herself a little neglected by Paul. He came to see her at rarer intervals than formerly; he only remained a short time, and there was a pre-occupied air of happiness over his whole person which she could not understand, and as she had no reason to believe it emanated from herself, she rather resented it. Women seldom like men with whom they are intimate to have any happiness except of their own contributing. She began to think he was hard-hearted and unsympathizing, and to be discontented with the grave kindness with which he treated her; she was dissatisfied with his friendliness; her humour became unequal; she was often petulant and unreasonable; she did not know what it was in Paul that gave her pain, but what he said never pleased her; she missed the peculiar look of approval which had

once rested upon her, though she had then taken little note of it. When he went away she felt collapsed and depressed. She became quieter than ever; an indifferent observer might have thought her ill-humoured, but Paul was quite content, he read aright the symptoms of re-awakening sensibility.

CHAPTER VII.

THE time came when Paul had to return to the convent. It was a trial to his resolution to be obliged to leave his unfinished house—his professional labours—still more to absent himself from Marguerite at the first dawn of his hopes ; but the plan being settled, it never occurred to him to relax or remodel it in any respect.

On the day which he had fixed for his return he went to say farewell to Marguerite. He found her seated at her work, the invalid in his chair, and the little Juana playing before a chair. The child, now near three years old, ran up to him and greeted him with every demonstration of childish

gladness, going with naive selfishness to the root of the matter by exclaiming :

“Mamma, mamma, get me ready, Paul is come to take me out.”

“No, darling, not to-day, I have no time ; but see what I have brought for you,” and Paul produced a magnificent wax-doll, dressed in the height of fashion. “See ! do you like it ?”

The young lady pouted and tossed her head disdainfully, and, looking askance on the doll, said :

“No ; I want to go to the garden—I will go, and you shall take me !”

Paul laughed at the petulant miniature-coquet, who looked charmingly pretty with her little airs. This of course rendered the young lady indignant ; she twisted herself away from Paul, stamped with her little foot and burst into a good genuine fit of crying.

This little scene had engaged Paul so much

that he had not yet addressed Marguerite; he now turned towards her. There was a cloud on her face, and she received him with great coldness. In an ordinary mortal he would have called it ill-humour. He had not been to see her for a fortnight. The truth was that he had been trying to wean himself from the habit of seeing her every two or three days.

“Juana,” said she, sharply, “cease crying, or go into that corner; you are troublesome.”

As the young lady did not obey the admonition, Marguerite occupied herself for the next few minutes with endeavouring to bring her to reason, and finished by putting her to stand with her face to the wall. She then, without taking any notice of Paul, went into the inner apartment, where she was apparently engrossed by some household affair that left her no room for conversation. This was of course very rude, and Paul

was not pleased ; but as he sat watching Marguerite he saw that she looked ill and anxious. The fact was that she had been expecting Paul for many days past, and was angry and disappointed that he had not come. Her temper, which formerly never failed, had of late become extremely unequal. Paul partly understood all this, but it did not make her present conduct in the least more agreeable.

He sat silently awaiting her pleasure, but she showed no sign of returning ; indeed she began to find herself dreadfully embarrassed, and did not know how to come back with a good grace, for her occupation had been a mere pretext of the moment. At length, to her great relief, Paul said :

“Marguerite, will you not come and take Juana out of her corner—she is good now—and come and sit down for five minutes. I want to speak to you.”

She did not, however, hurry herself, but loitered for a few moments to avoid, as she thought, the appearance of doing as she was bid. At last she leisurely returned, and had nearly surprised Paul in an act of larceny. He had been looking about for some relic that he might carry off, and as he spoke his eye had fallen on a red and black flowered silk handkerchief, which he had often seen over Marguerite's neck. He was sorry he had disturbed her, but the few moments she lingered gave him time to take it, and conceal it in his bosom. The slight embarrassment at being so nearly found out Marguerite attributed to resentment at her behaviour. She first forgave Juana, and sent her to play in the next room, then she occupied herself about her father, and at last, having no further pretext for doing otherwise, she resumed her seat, and took up her work.

Paul watched her in silence, and she

did not speak. At last, by way of saying something, she said :

“What a charming day it must be out of doors !”

“Well, not precisely ; there has been pouring rain all the morning, and your street is scarcely passable from mud. It is fair now, certainly ; but I think there will be rain again before long.”

“Ah, do you think so ?” said Marguerite, with an appearance of vivacious interest, but without the smallest idea of what she was saying.

“Yes, I really believe that it is going to rain ; but Marguerite, that is not what I came to talk about. I am going away to-day, and shall not return for some time, and I came to say good bye. I wish you had kept that house-work till I was gone.”

Marguerite felt a painful contraction of the heart, but she resented the reproach.

“How could I know you were going away? you did not tell me. It is long since, I knew anything of your movements; may one ask, whither you are going?”

“That I am not free to tell you, but I shall be absent some time. Juana will miss her walks.”

“Children at her age forget very easily, and you seem to have become so tired of coming, that you will be glad of a good reason why you cannot come. Juana has not been out since you were here.”

“But that is not right, she must have fresh air.”

“Permit me to do as I think best for her,” said Marguerite, haughtily.

“Certainly,” said Paul, gently; “I came to-day partly to bring you an order, or if you will, a request for some lace to trim an Alb for his eminence, the Cardinal de Rochfort. The price is no consideration. The Alb is only to be used for occasions of high ceremony, so

make it as delicate and choice as you please. I have obtained permission for the pattern to be left altogether to your own taste and judgment. As it is work that must occupy you for some time, I have brought you some money on account."

Paul laid down a pocket-book beside her—

"And now I may delay no longer. God bless you, Marguerite. If you need help or counsel before I return, go to the Curé from whom Madame Bobbinet receives her pension."

Marguerite gave one wild quick glance into his face, but there was no answering look in Paul's eye; he was calm and grave, very gentle and very kind; there was nothing to find fault with or to complain of; but Marguerite felt that he was very cruel.

"I shall at least see you when you return?" said she, as calmly as she could, though her lips could scarcely frame the words."

"Be sure that the first day I am free, I will come to you."

The words in themselves were well enough, but the manner gave them no emphasis or meaning. Marguerite was dissatisfied—she expected—she knew not what.

"Farewell, then," said she, turning abruptly away. As she went she murmured something about fetching Juana to say good bye, but when she returned with the child Paul was gone. He could not have trusted his fortitude a moment longer. Marguerite had no doubt he had departed in displeasure. Her remorse was quick and exaggerated; she felt guilty of great ingratitude; the sudden departure of Paul seemed to have wrenched away her life; she sat down in the chair he had quitted and cried bitterly. The little Juana stood at her knee, wondering at her mother's agitation.

"Mamma, are you naughty? Was Paul angry?"

Marguerite could not reply. The invalid, too, was clamouring for attention. Marguerite had no leisure to indulge her tears; hastily wiping them away, she kissed Juana and busied herself about her father.

At night, when she put Juana to bed, she looked about for her red and black flowered handkerchief; she could find it nowhere, and asked the child if she had meddled with it.

"No, mamma; but I know where it is?"

"Go and find it for me, then."

"But I cannot—Paul took it; I saw him."

"When did you see him?"

"You put me in the corner, and when I heard Paul call you I just looked round, and I saw him take that handkerchief and hide it in his coat as you came in. Was

it not stealing if you did not give it to him?"

"No, my child; no!

"Why not, mamma? It is stealing to take what is not our own—you said so when you whipped me the other day."

"Little girls should not make observations about grown-up people. Paul never does what is wrong. Try to be like him, and go to sleep."

But Miss Juana was perplexed in her mind, and half-an-hour afterwards she sat up in bed and said:

"But mamma, I cannot understand. Did you give Paul that handkerchief, and did he know he might take it?"

"Yes, he did," said Marguerite, impatiently.

"Then why—"

"Juana, I shall be very angry if you do not go to sleep. Little girls like you

are not to ask questions. Go to sleep, I desire you!"

Poor Juana lay down again with a sigh of resignation, and Marguerite did not shed any more tears that night.

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH Marguerite the days passed drearily. In spite of the comfort that the circumstance of the purloined handkerchief gave her, the fact of Paul's continued absence, the certainty that an indefinitely long time must pass before she would see him again, only revealed to her how dear and how necessary to her life he had become. Bitterly she reproached herself with her capricious humours, which had so often embittered his visits. She now wondered what demon could have possessed her. With the natural feminine faculty for self-tormenting, she contrived to imagine that Paul had bid her farewell for ever, and that he had taken

the handkerchief intending never to come back.

She nursed these painful thoughts whilst sitting over her daily task,—the only solace she found was in her work, and that not so much from the innate virtue that is said to exist in labour as in the thought that she was doing Paul's last bidding, and that it was a task he himself had set her to fulfil.

Paul meanwhile had retired to his convent, where his presence was hailed with great gladness by the Superior. His position had the advantage over Marguerite's, that he had full and ample occupation, which left him little time to think of anything beside. Underlying all was the solid conviction that Marguerite at last loved him, and that was quite sufficient comfort to beautify any amount of the ordinary troubles or employments of life. He had now a future to look forwards to—a future

of rational, healthy human existence. , It may seem hard-hearted and unsympathetic, —unsentimental it certainly was,—but the fact, nevertheless, stood as we are compelled to record it. Paul was very happy! The Superior had never seen him so bright. The arrears of business which, as usual, had been left to accumulate for his return, disappeared like darkness before daylight. The other monks found Paul changed greatly for the pleasanter,—his nature had received the touch of mercifulness which alone had been wanting to his excellence. He had become so much more lovable and human that he was able to carry with ease and even with popularity many small reforms which he had formerly found impracticable.

It might be about three months that had passed thus, when the sudden death of the bailiff of some of the convent lands in the south of France rendered it need-

ful to revise his accounts, and appoint a successor. The Superior turned of course to Paul. Loth as he was to part with him, there was no one else to send.

"Tell me," said Paul, "how long I may be absent."

"So long as you find it needful for the good of the community. Do not linger beyond the necessary time, for nothing goes well here in your absence."

"Fix the time, reverend father, and let me show my obedience by keeping within the limit. The journey is long and painful, the conveniences of travel are few, the spot is remote, and the business for which my presence is required may be long and troublesome. Say what will you consider a reasonable time, and I will use all diligence to keep to it."

"You are so clever, so very apt in the dispatch of business, that you do not need so long as any other."

“But,” interposed Paul, “my dispatch of business will not expedite my journey, nor lessen my obstacles; I shall need as much material time as another to get over the bad roads.”

“True, true, but one helps the other—quick at meat, quick at work—but I don’t want to be hard on you; I don’t want you to kill yourself, Paul; on the contrary, take great care of yourself, and do not live too poorly. I sometimes think you do not take enough to support your strength, so live generously, I charge you, and as for time,—say three months, or thereabouts; if I see your face again by that time, I shall be well content. And now, take my best blessing and depart, and see that you take ample funds for your journey, and that you travel with all needful comfort.”

Paul knelt to receive the official benediction, and when he rose, the

old man opened his arms and embraced him.

“God bless you, Paul! and send you safe back to me; I am getting old, and you are my son, my only son, my one precious thing in this life.”

Paul secretly taxed himself with hardness, because he felt his heart bound with pleasure at this unexpected and uncalculated liberation. Whatever time he could save out of the three months' leave of absence was honestly his own. Three months was little enough to do all that had been entrusted to him; but with his motives for exertion impossibilities became practicable.

One night Marguerite had sat up later than usual to finish a frock for Juana. She had been more than ordinarily harassed and depressed during the day. Her work had fallen from her fingers, her head rested upon her hand, and she was indulg-

ing in the luxury of a fit of bitter musing. Suddenly she heard a step ascending the stair to her room; it was like one she remembered well, though it must have been the pure fancy that made her heart beat so violently; but still the step came nearer, it suddenly faltered, and then stopped. Marguerite's agitation became intense; her eyes were fixed on the door; she scarcely breathed; she expected she knew not what, but hope is quicker than expectation; a slight knock was heard, the door opened, and when Paul appeared she was not surprised.

She rose to meet him like a guest who had certainly been expected. There was no need for her to speak; in her first glance, in her silence, Paul read all the love that had matured during his absence. She did not even meet his gaze, but he felt that her eyes were good to him. He took her hand in silence, and they re-

turned to the fireside together. He drew a chair opposite to her, that he might gaze upon her. She took up her work to hide her emotion, but she took few stitches.

"Are you not surprised to see me here, and at this hour," said he, at length.

"No—it seems quite natural now that you are come; I suppose I am too glad to see you again to be able to feel surprise. But what is the matter? You are ill, you are faint. Is the fire too much for you?"

"No Marguerite, I am hungry!"

The first flush of meeting had passed over, and now Paul indeed looked ill, almost ghastly; the heat of the fire had overcome him, and it was with difficulty he kept himself from falling.

Marguerite started up. A loaf of bread and a pitcher of fresh water were the first things that came to hand, and she

placed those before him, whilst she hastened to make some coffee, and prepare some thing more substantial.

Paul ate like the famished man he in truth was; Marguerite's coffee was excellent; there were fresh eggs too, and a pot of honey. Marguerite stood beside him and helped him to everything there was, it made their mutual position more natural; besides which, a woman always likes to perform small domesticities for the man she cares about.

"Marguerite!" said Paul, looking up; "do not think me a wolf, but I have travelled hard and have neither rested nor eaten since yesterday morning, with the exception of a piece of rye-bread, which I obtained from a blacksmith, at whose forge I was obliged to stop, for my mule had cast a shoe."

"But why did you travel so hard, and go so long without food? it is not good for you."

"My work took me longer than I expected,

and I had tried to save a few days to come to see you, so you may imagine that I grudged every moment I could redeem from such mere personalities as eating and sleeping. I did not know I was so tired."

"So exhausted, you should rather say. Oh, Paul! and was it to see me that you made such effort, and after I had behaved so ill to you! I was so sorry after you were gone, I have so much wished to tell you how sorry I am; will you forgive me?"

Paul took Marguerite's hand in one of his, and with the other he opened his vest, and shewed Marguerite her lost handkerchief.

"Will you forgive *me*?" he asked, as he replaced it.

"I knew you had it, Juana saw you take it."

"And you were angry?" said Paul.

"No; but Juana could not understand why you took what had not been given to you. Have you kept it all this time?"

"Yes—there—just where it is now. Marguerite you are changed—your look, your manner towards me are different—tell me—are you only sorry for your ill-humour—or, if I were to say again the words I once uttered, when on the verge of delirium, would your answer be the same?"

Marguerite's head drooped but she made no effort to withdraw the hand Paul had taken, and when he took the other to turn her towards him, she made no resistance.

"Tell me, Marguerite, would you give me the same answer?"

"No."

"Marguerite, look at me, that I may be sure I hear aright."

Marguerite's eyes were raised for a moment to Paul's.

"You love me then—a very little?"

"A great deal I am afraid," said she, disengaging her hands and covering her face."

"God bless you, Marguerite, you have

made me very happy—it repays me for all my life. But why are you ‘afraid’ that you love me much instead of little?” said Paul, drawing her nearer to him.

“Oh, because, because—we always love more than any one loves us.”

“There is no fear that you can do that with me. Oh, Marguerite, I have loved you so long!”

There was no other word spoken between them for some time—tears rained down Marguerite’s face, and yet she looked unutterably happy.

“Oh, Paul, I ought to be so much better than I am to be worthy of you. I do not deserve you should care for me.”

“Hush!” said Paul, “and don’t change. I don’t wish you to be anything but what you are!”

Paul sat in a large oak chair beside the fire, and Marguerite sat on a low chair at his side, her head resting upon his hand.

There was silence which neither of them wished to break. At last Marguerite looked up and saw that Paul slept. He was completely broken by fatigue. He had travelled since early the previous day, without food or rest, and for many previous days his exertions had been enormous. His task had been much more onerous than he had anticipated. The whole of the lands had to be surveyed and re-valued, all the farm-rents re-adjusted, the dishonesty of the late bailiff and the stupidity of his successor had thrown obstacles in the way of all his efforts to conclude the business. He saw day after day pass over, and his hope of rescuing time for a visit to Marguerite grew less and less. At first he had dreamed of a few weeks, then it had dwindled to days, at last a few hours were all he could possibly hope for, if indeed the chances of travel, bad roads, robbers and water-floods did not absorb even those. He held himself bound, in honour, to take not a

moment beyond the time appointed for himself.

As Marguerite looked upon his face whilst he slept she saw with pain the worn, aged, fatigued aspect he bore. His garments, which she had not remarked before, were covered with mud. She understood everything at a glance; she knew how much exertion it had required for him to come to her. Gently she disengaged her hand, and rose from her seat. She first replenished the fire which had burned low, and then fetching a large soft shawl and a cushion, she covered him, and placed the pillow beneath his head, without disturbing him. Shading the light from his eyes she then resumed her work, and sat watching beside him till the morning broke, then she softly prepared breakfast, and put the room to rights; the labour of her day was about to begin.

The force of long habit awoke Paul at the usual convent hour for matins; at first he

could not remember where he was, and even then it seemed like the continuation of a dream, to see Marguerite flitting about hither and thither, casting, from time to time, furtive glances to see if he were awake.

He did not comprehend how long he had slept, and he leaned back watching her for some moments longer through his half-closed eyes.

At last she approached to awaken him.

"Have I slept long?"

"Some hours; are you rested now? You were very tired."

"I suppose I was, and now I must remain no longer."

"Two minutes more. I have made you some coffee."

"Not one minute; I ought not to be here now. Farewell, Marguerite—*my* Marguerite; when I come again will you become my WIFE?"

"Oh, Paul, do not go!"

“Say yes, and do not try to hinder me.”

“But when shall I see you again?”

“Am I to go then without the word I ask for?”

She had followed him to the door—his hand was already on the latch; he turned his face upon her, with a smile, and taking her hand said—

“Is it then YES?”

“Yes.”

Paul was already gone, and Marguerite felt wonderfully inclined to sit down and cry at his abrupt departure.

CHAPTER IX.

THE day came at last when Paul was free to leave his convent and to commence his life as a human being.

Had no misgivings about the course in which he was about to embark not only himself, but the life and fortunes of another, assailed him during his seclusion, and enforced pause? We are compelled to say no—not for a moment. Men like Paul do not pause to think; after they have once taken a resolution they go straight on. Paul knew quite well the difficulties that were likely to beset him—but he had faith in himself to control things and people, and to steer both Marguerite and himself through any ordinary

contingencies, and for emergencies he trusted to his own resources, which hitherto had always stood him in stead.

No consciousness of doing wrong for a moment intruded itself,—*that* would have found him defenceless; he feared to do wrong, and that was the only fear he knew; but then he was his own judge, and his own tribunal; what *he* thought right was right for him, and his own conscience was the only control he recognised. A man of his stamp might commit mistakes, but he would never palter dishonestly with scruples about right and wrong.

Paul's first visit was to his house, to see how matters had gone on during his absence.

The old woman was still there, she had duly aired the rooms and opened the windows. Much still remained to be done to the half-finished apartments before they would be in the condition which Paul would have

wished before he introduced Marguerite, but Paul had waited so long for life that he was not likely to delay for the mere raiment.

The house was much as he had left it, but the garden had fared worse; some zealous neighbours had sent their children to work in it, and the result had not been fortunate, owing to their inability to distinguish accurately between flowers and weeds. But Paul was too happy in his freedom to be ruffled.

The neighbours came round, rejoicing at his return; how they had existed during his absence would have puzzled anyone to say who had heard the accumulation of ailments which kept him employed for several hours in hearing and prescribing.

"You see," said one, "we did not like to have any other doctor, so we just let be, till such times as you should come

back ; it was a long time, but we felt sure you would not deceive us."

Paul was more impatient of these hindrances than of his six months' detention in the convent, but his work was not yet done. He had still to visit his poor people, and to ascertain that they had received the alms he had left for them during his absence.

Although Paul, as a matter of course, did not appropriate to his own use a fraction of the convent money, there was no reason why he should not still continue to distribute the convent charities.

He knew all the waste and malversation that went on in spite of his efforts at reform, and he was not going to allow the few streamlets that flowed in their legitimate course to be diverted or dried up.

A small sum still remained to him for his own use from his former earnings, and for the present Marguerite must consent to be poor.

At last he was *free* to go to her! to make her his wife! to transmute into life and reality the dream of love that for so many years he had nourished in secret.

He strode along at a rapid pace, yet he seemed to himself to linger; flying would have been all too tardy, but his feet seemed shod with lead. He had no sense of misgiving, his heart was full of impatient happiness; at every step he was nearing reality; all he had ever hoped for was coming true.

At last he reached the door and bounded up the steps. Madame Bobbinet was sitting in her great chair, weeping and wringing her hands.

A conviction of evil passed, like a bolt of ice, through Paul's heart—nevertheless, he said quietly—almost coldly it might have seemed but for the whiteness of his lips:

“What is your trouble, Madame Bobbinet?”

He juggled with his own horrible certainty, for he knew before she spoke that it concerned himself and not her.

“Oh, little papa! little papa!” she cried, with a fresh burst of grief, “you are come in good time for the worst—that dear little child up stairs, whom I loved as my own, is dead of the small-pox, and I blame myself for it. You see the old gentleman was taken worse, and I asked Madame Marguerite to let the little one come down to me—for she had enough on her hands with the old gentleman—a neighbour whose child has it came in, and must have brought the infection, for the poor child sickened that night;—”

Madame Bobbinet became inarticulate with sobs.

“And the old gentleman?”

"Ah, poor, dear, innocent old man! he has gone to his rest just as his daughter could no longer nurse him."

"Marguerite?" gasped Paul.

"Ay, that is the worst—I was afraid you would ask."

"Is she dead, then?"

"No, not quite—but the doctor has just been, and says he fears it will go hard with her. She was so worn out with nursing the others before she took it herself. The spots do not come out as they should."

Paul was stunned into calmness by the very excess of his calamity. He did not speak, but began to ascend the stairs—less like a living being than one walking in his sleep.

"Oh, little papa, don't go away like that—just tell me you don't hate me for the mischief I have done—I did not know—indeed I did not."

Madame Bobbinet's piteous tones arrested Paul ; he turned back and said gently :

"Dear Madame Bobbinet, do not add sorrow to sorrow. You are not to blame. You were not even accidentally the cause of the mischief. If that dreadful disease is going about, Juana might have taken it all the same had she never left her mother's room. Do not reproach yourself for what you meant so kindly."

"Oh, God bless you, little papa, for saying so !"

The poor woman's gratitude and relief were intense. Paul had never done a greater act of kindness in his life than when, in the midst of his own trouble, he turned back to speak those words.

On opening the door of the first room, he was struck back by the deep, suffocating, peculiar odour of mortality. The room was darkened and dimly illuminated by

two tapers. On a table, and lying side by side, covered with a sheet, lay the two bodies of the old grandfather and the little child. A priest, in a dirty, sordid gown, was saying prayers beside them. He looked up as Paul entered, but without interrupting his monotonous muttering. Paul made the sign of the cross, and, bowing his head, passed on.

In the inner room Marguerite lay in bed, tossing restlessly about ; she was evidently suffering a great deal ; her head was confused and she did not recognise him. The room was very close and the air insufferable. An old woman sat beside the bed who had been brought in as a nurse, but she seemed half stupified, either with drink or laudanum. She looked vacantly at Paul, but when he went to the window to throw it open, she sprang up and seized his arm, declaring he would kill the sick woman. Paul shook her off

and ordered her to fetch some vinegar; but when he saw the stupid, helpless look with which she heard him, and with how much difficulty she hobbled to the door, he called her back, and bidding her remain where she was, and on no account to close the window, he went himself in search of what was necessary.

Madame Bobbinet was too much afraid of infection to venture up stairs herself, notwithstanding her love for Marguerite, but she gladly did all she could in other respects, furnished him with all he required, and set off with a velocity that could scarcely have been expected, to take a note from Paul to the Curé, from whom she received her weekly pension. It was to request that a supply of linen and a good nurse might be sent immediately.

Pending their arrival, Paul purified to some degree the atmosphere of the sick-room, and quelled the sickening odour by

the fumes of burning vinegar, which he sprinkled plentifully upon the walls and floor, to the great disgust and scandal of the old priest, who had by that time finished his prescribed devotions, and who could understand nothing beyond the bottle of dirty and foetid holy water he had brought with him.

Paul pacified him, partly by words, and partly by a much larger fee than he had ever hoped to receive. He willingly undertook the directions for the funeral, which it was desirable should take place at once.

But for the opportune arrival of Paul the funeral would have been performed by the authorities of the quarter in the style which takes away from death all that is sacred, leaving only the ghastly, sordid horrors of a pauper's grave. The rich can, at least, disguise the disgusting materialism of dissolution; and the

Chinese are wise in their deep aspiration that they may not die childless but have sons to perform the last rites for them. It needs the love and piety of children to do fitting reverence to the dead.

The necessary preparations were soon made. Paul himself placed on the soldier's breast, covered with wounds, the cross and decoration so hardly won. The coffin was closed, and the old man, full of years and sorrows, was carried away to his rest along with the young child who had only a few years crossed the threshold of life.

The funeral was decent and sufficient. Paul and Madame Bobbinet were the only mourners, but the Curé and two assistants met the bodies at the entrance of the church and performed a full service over them ; they were afterwards carried to the grave which Paul had secured, and to which he could without shame lead Marguerite when time should have softened her grief, or where, if—

but even in thought he did not dare pursue the terrible alternative.

On his return to the house he found that, under the care of the Sister of Charity, everything had been arranged and provided that could mitigate the danger and suffering of the terrible disease; the symptoms were slightly more favourable, but it must run its full course, and there was nothing for Paul but to wait for the crisis like a shipwrecked man on a rock watching the creeping of the tide, not knowing whether the deep waters will pass over his head, or whether they will turn and leave him his naked shivering life.

CHAPTER I

At length the crisis of the disease came; it was what the doctor called "a salutary crisis," and Marguerite was saved, though the very shadow of death had fallen upon her.

Paul drew a deep free breath; the relief from the overpowering suspense was in the first moment like a sudden pain. Marguerite was saved; she had come out of the deadly struggle with life. Whether the disease would have left any of its traces upon her never occurred to him.

Marguerite was Marguerite to him, and however she looked, she would still be Marguerite. It is only the highest love that can

allow its object to be its own self, and not insist that it should reflect the image of our own personality.

Marguerite, though out of danger from the disease, was still weak as an infant, and the doctor was imperative on the necessity of absolute quietness. No one was to be admitted to speak to her; above all, she was neither to be agitated nor contradicted. Paul came three times a-day to the door, and heard from Madame Bobbinet those minute accounts of her state which the doctor had considered too trivial to mention, details which are the events of a sick room, and so full of interest to the loving anxious hearts whose treasure lies there.

The first day that Marguerite's eyes were strong enough to bear a glimmer of daylight, she startled the Sister of Charity by suddenly asking for—a looking-glass!

The sister, who had just risen from the recital of her morning prayers, in which she

believed Marguerite had joined, was both perplexed and pained by the request.

She first gently chided her for her vanity.

"If," said she, "He who has rescued you from death would have had you beautiful, He would have kept you so."

"Am I then so *very* ugly?" said poor Marguerite, piteously.

The sister did not immediately reply, and Marguerite, weak and fretful from illness, burst into tears.

The sister rose gravely, and fetched a small hand-mirror. Marguerite closed her eyes for an instant, and then desperately looked herself in the face. A glance was enough; the beautiful face was puffed and the features swelled; the clear transparent skin was covered with red spots; the eyes were small and contracted; the fringe of long silken lashes had fallen off. The change was startling enough.

Marguerite let fall the mirror, and covering her face with her hands, buried her head in

the pillows, saying, in a tone that touched the sister's heart—

“ Oh, Paul ! Paul ! ”

“ Nay, now, that is not right,” said the sister, soothingly ; “ it is rebellious, you are just saved from death, and you rebel because He who gave you your beauty, has required it from you again. If you could make an act of humility and acquiesce with all your heart, you might have the merit of offering it up.”

“ You have never been tried,” said Marguerite, and looking up with a feeling of envy into the fair, pale face that was bending over her ; “ you are still lovely.”

“ That beauty,” said the young nun, sadly, “ was a snare and a delusion whilst I lived in the world. It did not bring me one moment's happiness, and it did not win for me the only human love I ever cared for. He was won from me by a woman who was not fair, as the world said I was ; neither did she care for him

as I did, and yet she had that love pressed upon her, which in my undisciplined wild heart I would have given my life to have known was my own but for one moment. I never knew peace until I had laid myself and all I possessed, upon the altar of Him, who has said—‘Come unto me, ye that are weary, and I will give you rest.’”

Marguerite wept on and made no reply.

“You grieve more for your lost beauty than for your lost child,” said the nun, reproachfully.

“No, no; you do not know what you are saying, or you would not speak so cruelly; go away, leave me for awhile.”

The sister smoothed the pillows, refreshed the poor tear-stained cheeks with some fragrant waters, and darkening the room, went softly out. In a few minutes Marguerite, exhausted, fell asleep.

She still slept, when the doctor arrived.

"How is this? What has agitated her."

"She insisted upon seeing a mirror; she was so imperative that I judged compliance a less risk than contradiction. The result showed that I was unwise."

"I don't wonder—it is very trying to women to lose their beauty, very—you must soothe her."

"I told her it was a sin."

"Bah! when she awakens, tell her that I say all the redness and swelling will disappear entirely; and for the pits, they will be few; and I will bring her a cream which is sovereign in its effects upon the skin; tell her she will be as handsome as ever again, tell her anything; but for heaven's sake keep her quiet; tell her crying will ruin her eyes."

"I will tell her anything that is true, but I will not give her vain hopes."

"It is true that if she cries in this

way, she will make her face worse, and inflame her eyes, perhaps go blind; for the rest, there is no telling as yet how she will look, so we may as well prophecy for the best. But how are you? You have had the disease, I hope?"

"No I have not, but I do not fear it."

"Have you tried then this new specific? Inoculation as they call it?"

"No! we may not fly from danger, but we may not rashly seek it. I prefer to leave myself altogether in the hands of Him who made me, to be dealt with as it pleases Him."

"Hum—ha—well. Inoculation is a risk, certainly, but I have seen wonderful results—wonderful. Where there is no prejudice against it, I do not hesitate to recommend the practice of it. It makes the disease almost safe, but then there is, on the other hand, the chance of escaping it altogether."

"I prefer to trust myself to the good pleasure of my Maker, rather than to rely on any human invention."

"Well!" said the doctor, kindly, "go home to the convent, and send one of your companions, for I fear you are beginning with the disease."

The young nun bent down her head, her hands were crossed over her breast, her lips moved as in prayer; when she again looked up her face wore a gleam of brightness as though it were the distant dawning of a new hope, but it passed away, and her features relapsed into their usual aspect of subdued tranquility.

When Marguerite awoke, a stranger sat beside her bed, wearing the same garb, but an older, coarser personage; who, nevertheless, had an expression of good-nature and good-sense on her broad, flat face.

Marguerite was bewildered: "Sister Beatrice, where is she gone?"

“It was my turn to take her place; the Mother Superior sent me, and we don’t ask questions,” said the sister, smiling.

At length Marguerite was well enough to leave her room, to see any one she liked. Marguerite felt no joy at coming back to life—she wished she had died when she was so near it. She was still weak and tottering,—the exertion of dressing made her sick and faint. The good-natured old sister was to leave her that morning; already her stay had been prolonged beyond the strictly needful period, and Marguerite dreaded being left alone.

When she entered the sitting-room, fresh flowers were on the table, and her father’s empty chair had been placed beside the fire for her. Juana’s playthings were neatly arranged on a shelf, and the doll which Paul had given her sat in dollish state on a small sofa which Marguerite

had bought for her the last time she was out. Everything was put into its place with painfully neat precision, everything was cruelly visible. Marguerite's embroidery-frame hung against the wall; there was nothing missing save the two living creatures whose life had been bound up in her life, and who never would come again.

Marguerite gazed round with a scared, bewildered look; she felt so weak, and life seemed so strong and cruel—she had no faith, no hope—nothing seemed real to her except her own misery. A horrible depression of heart possessed her, which neither words nor tears could utter—a sigh, as from one suffocating, at last came from her breast.

The sister perceived nothing of all this; she chirped and chattered away with a good-humoured babble that was irritating past endurance to the poor sore

heart and unstrung nerves. Marguerite leaned back and closed her eyes. She lay quite still, without the strength even to give a sign of suffering.

The sister thought she slept; she could understand *that*, and was silent. She busied herself to prepare some refreshment, and as Marguerite still continued quiet, she placed it to be ready beside the fire and prepared for her own departure. She would have liked to take leave, and to have a few gossiping last words, but she consoled herself by putting the disappointment to swell the merit of her act of charity, for she had taken such a liking to Marguerite that her services had partaken far more of human affection than of the single eye to her own salvation and the good of her own soul, which, in an orthodox "good deed," ought to be the first consideration and ruling motive. So sister Barbara packed up her satchel, and

after looking once more round the room to see if there were any other services she could render, murmured a couple of "Hail Marys" and softly departed.

Marguerite still sat in the same posture of hopeless dejection—a step approached the door, and an instant after Paul appeared.

Marguerite forgot herself—forgot everything in the first glad flash of seeing him again. She rose from her chair, and with a little cry of joy, such as that with which a child greets its mother, she flung herself into his arms.

"My Marguerite!—my wife!"

For a brief moment they were both unconscious from the very intensity of their emotion. He replaced her in her chair and sat down beside her. It was long before either of them spoke. Marguerite was the first to break the silence. Somehow, her fear that Paul would find the change in her appearance repulsive

had vanished like morning mist before the sun; all her sorrow, and depression, and sullenness had passed away—she was like a child grown good after a fit of naughtiness.

Paul looked brightly and radiantly happy, chastened only by the deep thankfulness with which he regarded his nearly lost, and so lately recovered, treasure.

“Oh, Marguerite!” said he, looking down upon her as she was crouched at his side, “I had never thought you could die—and that day when I came so full of gladness, and found you lying there almost without a chance of recovery—it was being cast into outer darkness—but till this moment I could not measure what a bottomless pit of despair it was!”

Marguerite raised the hand she held clasped in hers to her lips; she was still weak, and so much emotion overcame her. But in a little while Paul's presence

seemed to infuse new life and strength into her.

There was something on her mind she wished to say to him—a confession to be made—and now she gathered herself together for it. At first she spoke hesitatingly, but she grew firmer as she went on.

“I want to tell you, Paul,—I want you to know—how much I have suffered at—at becoming so frightful. I am unworthy of you,—my beauty was all I had to give you, and I had begun to prize it so much for your sake—it was something to give you; I thought of Mary Magdalen and her beautiful hair, and I fancied she must have felt as I did. Oh, Paul! I felt so abased—so unworthy of you,—you, who deserve that one should have given you all one’s life from the beginning—and for me to come to you with nothing; all the first fruits of my life gone—wasted. Oh, how I hated myself! I tried to persuade myself

that I never really cared for—for—any other than yourself,—but that was not true. Oh, Paul! to think that I have nothing to give you now, not even my beauty,—I do not deserve you, I deserve nothing, except to be miserable for ever!”

By this time Marguerite's tears were flowing abundantly; her attitude had an expression of gentleness and humility that was inexpressibly touching, and far more lovely than beauty. Paul was penetrated to the heart. If he could have loved Marguerite more entirely than he did already it would have won him. As it was it gave him a reverence for her; it added a crowning grace and tenderness to his love.

“Marguerite,” said he, as soon as he could control his voice; “my dear child, do not give way to exaggeration. I love you; I love you as you are; you are the fruit of all your past life, you are the blossom of its future. Do you say you give me nothing? do you

not bring to me the holy influence of all your past sorrows and errors? have they not strengthened and matured, and purified you? Do not waste your strength in regrets for the past. It is the impulse of all human beings to make a religion of their strong emotions. They would deny their past idols; they would persuade themselves out of the true worship they once ignorantly gave to them. But that is not right. We must pay the penalty of the blindness that has happened to us, and to which our own conscience confesses that we willingly lent ourselves, for if we were always true and brave we should see things as they really are clearer than we do, and then we should not waste ourselves so often nor so long upon idols which, if not the work of our own hands, are the work of our own self-will and of our imagination. When our blindness has passed away our punishment begins, for the idols remain monuments of

our own confusion—they remain to be burdens on our life. We have contracted obligations, and those obligations remain after our judgment has become better taught, and the affections which perverted it have become cold. This is the point I want to bring you to. It is not by denying, or justifying, or falsifying any portion of the Past that we can redeem it; we must enlarge our life, that our experience may bring forth its perfect work. Whatever is, exists only by the right of having had more reality and strength than anything opposed to it; our impulse to destroy is only in proportion to the limitation of our power to restore—to make whole—to comprehend it in a broader rule of life. We make, and must make, many mistakes, before we can affirm truly a single fact; those mistakes are partial experiences which a fuller knowledge will explain. Mistakes, like pain, have a great virtue in them. The difference between a wise man and a

fool does not lie in the individual facts of their respective lives ; but in the different results they bring out of the same things. And now, darling, to go back to your Past, once, and never more. I love you as you are, and for what you are. I am older, more experienced, have suffered more than you. I can complete your life, I can supply your need. My darling, your very faults suit me. If you do not, as you say, give me the first fruits of your life, you give me the first fruits of your sorrows ; all that lies within is pervaded and made perfect by love. — Marguerite ! my wife ! my darling ! be at peace !”

And Marguerite was at peace. She made no reply, but she nestled up to him and laid her head upon his bosom, and he held her in his arms like a tired child.

CHAPTER XI.

A FEW weeks afterwards Paul and Marguerite were married at the church of St. Geneviève. Madame Bobbinet was the only attendant. Marguerite felt no curiosity to ask, and Paul gave no explanation why he had invited neither friend nor relative to be present on the occasion.

The trace of Marguerite's illness, though still visible, had greatly moderated; her face had recovered its contour, and her eyes had regained their former beauty, and though the smoothness of the skin was, for the present, destroyed, there was reason to hope that the confident predictions of the doctor would not all be falsified. Marguerite had

no reason to regret lost beauty, for whatever had been effaced was more than compensated by the expression of noble tenderness, and the chastened repose which her past sorrows had given to her whole aspect.

They went home together alone. Madame Bobbinet was cordially invited to come the next day; but Paul would have no one to divide with him the introduction of Marguerite into the home he had prepared for her.

Marguerite's household goods had already been carried over to her future residence, and Paul had arranged them. The weeks of Marguerite's convalescence had not been wasted, and during that time Paul had realised his home. Having been a soldier he could turn his hands to everything, and all the contrivances for comfort, as well as much of the furniture, were the work of his own hands.

In the room on the right hand side he had his *cabinet de travail*; here he had arranged the

books and papers which he had brought from the convent ; there was not much attempt at anything beyond the strictest necessities. A large antique carved walnut wood bureau in the centre of the floor, a bench for his patients, where they might await their turn of audience at the hour set apart for their visits, and a large chair, completed the furniture ; but that chair was the chair in which he had fallen asleep on the night when he came off his journey, with the few hours he had saved for her.

“ You will give me that chair, Marguerite ? ” said he, smiling, “ it is my fetish—my household god—my peculiar portion of the goods which have fallen to me ! But now come and see what I have provided you with in exchange.”

In the room on the other side of the passage, Paul had exerted all his skill, and lavished all his resources to make it a shrine for Marguerite, where the life of his life was to dwell. The *intention* with which one works

makes itself felt in the result; it is the divinity which shapes our ends, though we may be unconscious of the instinct. In this room everything, from the ornaments on the mantel-piece to the curtains of the windows, were the expression and the utterance of his thoughts of Marguerite.

The whole room had an indescribable aspect of peace, and comfort, and cheerful warmth; there were no corners of banishment, all was in harmony and convenience. The walls were light-grey, stencilled with a graceful trellis pattern, wreathed with green leaves. There was a window at each end, one looking out upon the court which lay between the house and the street. Paul had repaired the palings, and brightened up the red tiled pavement; but he had had neither time nor means to do more. Therefore Marguerite's chair, the chair he had made for her with his own hands, and in which he had carved her name in antique characters, was placed beside the

window that looked into the garden, and on the stone-steps upon which it opened Paul had placed some plants and flowering shrubs. Marguerite's embroidery-frame was laid upon the table ; a small square of rich Persian carpet was in the centre of the floor, which, being oak, black with age, had capabilities for taking a high polish, but Paul had not developed them. A soft white, silky mat, which one of his patients had given Paul, was placed for Marguerite's feet. But Paul prided himself in particular on the arrangement of the window-curtains ; he had the nature of an artist, and he knew how much the management of the light has to do with the aspect of a room. Up stairs the rooms had the same air of brightness and homely comfort. The old alchemist must have left behind some secret which transmuted the dark sombre rooms into a cheerful, peaceful home. Paul had all along been aspiring after an ideal ; to him a *Home* meant so much, something so noble, so sacred, such an innermost

life, that the materials took, under his hands, a meaning and expression quite different to their actual existence as articles of furniture.

Marguerite went over all the rooms, clinging to her husband's arm; a pressure upon it, from time to time, was all the expression she could find, except the tears that fell like gentle rain down her cheeks.

"Oh, Paul, how beautiful!" she said at last; "you have made it look like a church—at least one feels as if one were entering some good place."

Paul smiled.

"I have not forgotten a saint for my Marguerite," said he, as he opened a door into a small hanging closet which he had made into an oratory. A picture of a noble-looking woman hung against the wall, with the legend of "Saint Marguerite" in old lettering on the frame.

Marguerite, who, like all women of her temperament was passionately religious, was

more touched, perhaps, with this mark of his thought than anything else.

“ Oh, Paul ! let us say our prayers now ; it is only to God that we can tell how happy we are.”

Paul’s whole life was concentrated into that day, not to grow fainter or weaker ; it was the entrance into a full maturity of existence, which went on from strength to strength.

Marguerite completed all he needed of soft, womanly excellence, and he perfected in her the qualities unawakened or left unformed. Neither of them was perfect ; but together they did the work of a well-complete, well-balanced life—their very faults suited each other.

Paul felt wonderfully proud of his new dignity, as head of a household—albeit, that household consisted only of himself, Marguerite and the old woman, of whom mention has before been made—still it was a family, and he had to work to provide for it !

If we could only realise our daily life instead of taking it as we do, hardened into common use and wont, it would be as when we look through a microscope and see the delicate and minute beauty which lies hidden from us in objects so common that we look at them without seeing.

We should not wait for another world to begin life in its newness; we should see the Heaven, into which all might enter, lying ready and mysterious and beautiful, close at hand, but we cannot enter therein because of unbelief—so it is only the outside of things with which we are familiar.

Swedenborg saw a deep truth when he made out heavenly existence to be only the perfecting of that begun here. Love carried into all the channels of daily life gives new powers and graces to those persons who before have seemed common-place, and it enables those more gifted to employ more worthily the powers they own before. After all, will it not be the power of

loving perfectly, which will make the great difference betwixt heaven and earth?

Paul had not naturally a good temper—persons of strong deep sensibility seldom have that smiling unruffled equability which receives praise as good temper, but he had his temper under good discipline.

Then the consciousness of the impending separation, like the certainty of an untimely death, gave a tender light to every passing day, and softened the accidental jars and breaks, such as in the beginning would be almost unavoidable between persons whose habits had been formed apart from each other. This impending temporary death hushed and calmed all impatience. Paul laid out his life so that when he was gone Marguerite might have the remembrance to live upon, and that nothing painful might cloud it; he wished to provide her with nothing but pleasant memories.

Time passed on, and the period for his

return to the convent drew inexorably close. Paul had never had the courage to tell Marguerite the mysterious necessity he was under to leave her for six months of the year, and he had never settled with himself what reason he should give. To tell her the truth was not possible, to tell her a falsehood was so repugnant as to be equally impossible. The task of telling her that he must go away was almost as painful as the reality.

Paul, firm and strong, and self-disciplined, though he was, fell ill with the task that lay before him. Of course, this state of things could not continue. The alteration in Paul's health made Marguerite miserable. She divined that he had some weight upon his mind. She regarded him with too much reverence to question him; her opinion of his wisdom was so profound, that whatever he did was right in her eyes, a matrimonial superstition which would be highly convenient, if it did not also entail the need that men should *really be* the

superior beings that their wives are enjoined to think them.

It was not until the evening before his departure that Paul summoned strength to speak. They were sitting over the fire in the little parlour. It was an evening in the beginning of November. It had been a grey, mild, sunless day, but the evening sun had burst through the dull sky, and was shining in a belt of fiery red on the edge of the bank of cloud, into which he was about to sink.

“Ah, there is the dear sun!” cried Marguerite; “it raises one’s spirits to see him, if but for a few minutes before he sets.”

She rose, and trimmed the logs upon the hearth and put in a few fir-cones, which diffused a bright blaze and cheerful odour. Paul watched her sadly. At length, with a sudden impulse, like that which at the last moment induces a reluctant bather, shiver-

ing on the brink to take the plunge, he said—

“Marguerite, I shall have to leave you to-morrow for a long time!”

The words were said, and Paul felt released from the undefined, unutterable dread that had possessed him so long, but Marguerite turned sick and pale as she looked mutely up to his face.

“Forgive me, Marguerite, I had not the courage to tell you before—that I married you, knowing that every year I must be absent from you a certain number of months. Nay, my darling, I am not a *loupe-garou*, nor yet an enchanter condemned to take another shape; nevertheless, I have to leave you. I cannot tell you why; it was an obligation laid on me before I knew you, before I ever saw you, and you must make me strong, not weak, to persevere. I could sacrifice it but it would not be right.”

“You are not married to another woman?”

cried Marguerite, with a sudden pang of jealousy.

“ No — do not torment yourself about other women. I shall neither see nor speak to one whilst I am away from you, and were all the women alive gathered together, they would be no more than shadows for me—no other woman has an existence for me, but you only. Nevertheless, I am not at liberty to tell you whither I go. It is the same reason that kept me from coming to you, after that first day I visited you. I had been seeking you diligently, ever since that evening when you nearly fell under the horses’ feet as you quitted the apothecary’s shop ; you brought back to me the image of one I had lost in early life—yet the hour in which I found you I was obliged to leave you ; judge then, if the necessity be a light one. I might give you a sufficient reason for my absence, but it would not be the real one. To the neighbours who may inquire about me, you will say that I am

physician and steward to a noble family in Lorraine, and that I have to visit the estates committed to my care."

"And that is *not* the case?"

"No, Marguerite, it is not."

"O Paul! if you go away, the knowing whether would make it no better, you would not be here. I will never ask your secret—never seek to know it—but, oh! *when* will you return?"

"Calculate, Marguerite! Have I not always come back to you, and always when you least looked for me? This is no new or strange thing, it is a necessity that has long lain upon me, and on no other conditions could I have made you my wife. Come, my darling, be brave; if I were a soldier I should have to leave you for distant service, and if we had lived in crusader times you would have lost me, with little chance of my ever returning from those distant climes. Nay, Marguerite, do not break my heart. Have courage."

When Marguerite awoke the next morning she was alone.

At first she tried to think that Paul was down stairs in his study, according to his custom every morning, but there was that peculiar stillness and emptiness by which one can discern that those we love and listen for are not there.

She rose and dressed herself hastily ; it was long past her usual hour.

On entering Paul's cabinet she saw that many of his books and papers were gone, and the old portress said that the master had gone out early, dressed as for a journey, and that he had given strict charge that the mistress was to be disturbed on no account whatever.

Marguerite turned into her empty parlour, heavy with sorrow. It was a dull, chilly day ; the little garden was wrapt in a cheerless mist of small rain ; she was sick at heart ; the silence pressed upon her ; she had shed no

tears since the previous night, they seemed all dried up ; a dull, desolate, choking misery lay upon her. Paul had vanished as though the earth had swallowed him up ; it gave a strange unrealness to her situation which terrified her.

A neighbour came for some medicine Paul had left out for her child ; she had seen him for a moment before he started on his journey ; it was later intelligence than Marguerite possessed, and when this good woman went on to gossip about what Paul had told her of his journey, Marguerite listened with intense interest, for though she knew it was not the fact of things as they really were, still it was a fact that Paul himself had said so.

This little interview cheered her, broke the spell of silence which had grown to seem a mystery. After the neighbour had left, and when Marguerite had transacted all her household work she sat down to her embroidery ; a letter fell from the frame. It

was from Paul! dated that very morning before leaving the house, and he had placed it there that she might find it after her first burst of sorrow was somewhat tranquilised. It contained only a few lines, but those few were full of passionate love, and thoughtful kindness; they did not promise that she should hear from him, but there was a list of things he requested her to do for him, and to attend to matters of business that she might have the comfort of believing were really of importance to him. It was for the moment as if Paul were with her—back in bodily presence before her. It was a letter—such as the heart of a woman might live upon for a long time; Marguerite felt almost happy in the reaction caused by the surprise of the letter; it revealed too so many things she would have to do before Paul returned.

CHAPTER XII.

THE days passed on; Marguerite found employment; she was not sad, for she had the memory of her love to live with. Absence makes love a religion with women; the sorrow of separation makes it sacred.

At first the neighbours questioned and wondered, but gradually they subsided into thinking it a matter of course. Marguerite seldom stirred beyond the door, and though most kind and friendly, was discreet and reserved of speech; she offered no point for gossip or idle commentaries.

During the whole six months no tidings came of Paul, for he was scrupulous in bating nothing from the period of his monastic life;

he kept the two currents of his life rigidly separate.

On the evening of the last day that the six months expired he entered his own house calm, grave, quiet, like a man who had quitted it but an hour before. His calmness passed over Marguerite, who, in seeing him, forgot the long absence, and it was as though he had not been an hour away. His presence made no more breach or dispersion upon the time than the perfume weighs down the air that bears it along. He was the same in presence as he had been in her thoughts, only there was the fullness of content. It is a poor love that depends on actual presence.

Paul sat down in his accustomed chair opposite to Marguerite; her embroidery was in her hands, though she did not work much.

For some time there was no speech between them, the silence was too full for words. At last he said :

“ Marguerite, have I been absent from

you all this time, or have I been always here?"

"I think now that you have been always here," said she, looking up with a bright gentle smile. "Oh, Paul! what have I done to deserve that I should belong to you? to be your wife? to owe you duty and allegiance is such happiness."

"And yet you are not by nature either humble or obedient," said he, laughing; "but a stubborn-hearted woman, if ever there was one!"

"Ah! yes, but obedience to you seems as natural as breathing, and you do not know how pleasant it is; perhaps I should chafe against mere authority; but one pays willing obedience to the right divine that is able to draw it forth."

"True, Marguerite; obedience is like confidence, we can only give as much as is inspired, and it needs to ripen and mature before it falls. A matter told before its time

is a crude incontinence of speech ; the same matter told in its due season is wise and helpful. Some day I shall feel the need to tell you the only secret I have kept from you."

"And till then I am content to wait. I have *you*, and out of you, and from you, grow all your actions. You are the stuff of which all you do is made, and as I have heard you say, 'the greater contains the less;' in having you do I not possess the circle of all you do?"

"Dear Marguerite! you have lived in solitude till you are grown metaphysical. Are you going to give me no supper? Do you recollect that supper you gave me when I came off a long journey?"

"Yes! and how abominably you behaved; going away without touching the breakfast I had made ready. Oh, Paul! how many virtues you made me hate by that remorseless stoicism! going away, because the hands of

the clock (which was too fast) pointed to the instant you had fixed to depart; you cannot think how checked and miserable you left me; it was ungentle haste, abrupt, and very unpleasant!"

"Was it? but how could I have left you to make it otherwise? I had to go, and I should have liked to stay, and there was nothing for it but to break away."

Marguerite made a pretty mutinous face, and putting aside her work prepared the table for supper.

There were not many events in the life of either Paul or Marguerite to record; they filled up each day, but they would not make a story.

The six months passed rapidly away. The day for Paul's return to his convent arrived. This time the parting was more painful than before, for Marguerite was expecting her confinement daily. But it never entered Paul's mind to delay his return a single hour; having once

made a law for himself, he adhered to it with inflexible firmness, and Marguerite allowed him to depart without uttering a word to detain him.

Time passed on ; many children were born to them, but of these only four lived—one of them only was a girl. Paul's means, modest at first, gradually increased—his circle of patients extended ; it was understood that he practised half the year in the provinces ; his patients accepted the fact, and made the most of the period when he was at home.

Twenty years passed thus. Paul still resided in the same house, but as their family increased he had built additions to it.

The eldest son had been articled to a notary, with the understanding that he was eventually to have a partnership. The daughter grew up extremely handsome, and there were symptoms of many suitors, but Paul

had to leave the chief care of the children to Marguerite, and it was to her they chiefly looked. The two others were boys of ten and twelve, going to school; the intermediate children had died young, leaving a wide space betwixt the elder and the younger. During all these years no cross accident had revealed Paul's secret. Long impunity had bred security, and he had almost ceased to recollect that the merest chance might destroy his whole life, and that the fair edifice of his domestic happiness was as baseless as a castle in the air.

At last the danger that had so long impended broke. It came in quite a different guise to what he had ever expected. It took the shape of a long past wish which was thus untimely granted.

Years ago he had desired to be the Prior of the order, and many excellent reforms and good arrangements had he devised, when his soul was vexed with the waste and ill-

ordering of all things that he saw around him. He had desired to be the Prior that he might reform the order, and make it as useful and powerful as it was intended to be when first founded. After many years of disgust and silent endurance of wrong the opportunity of righting it came.

The poor old Prior, full of years and infirmities, was minded to lay down the burden of his office, and spend the short remainder of his days in prayers and meditation.

He convened a Chapter of the order, in which he resigned his dignity, begged pardon of the monks for any offence or scandal he had given, and, in conclusion, begged them to elect, as his successor, brother Paul.

Most strenuously did Paul try to ward off the honour, but the Chapter was unanimous in its voice—Paul was elected Prior.

It was close upon the beginning of his six months' liberation. At a glance he saw that all was over—that he must henceforth live

altogether in his cloister. The blow was sudden, and nearly stunned him.

He asked three days to deliberate, which were granted.

There could be no reserves now. Marguerite must know his secret.

CHAPTER XIII.

It was the twentieth anniversary of their marriage day. Paul was expected home after his six months' absence. The whole family and neighbourhood had become so accustomed to the arrangement, that it was taken as a matter of course—only to Marguerite it ever retained its painful dreariness. Her children and the cares of a family had failed to reconcile her or to occupy her heart; not that she ever manifested any dejection, she was always calm and gentle, none but her own heart knew the weight of sorrow it had to bear.

Marguerite's love for Paul had become an idolatry—she only lived in his presence or in the thought of him—everything she did, every

thought of her heart was towards him. When he was away, his presence still was with her and enveloped her—her love for him was worthy to be called a religion, if the object had not been mortal.

On this particular day the two younger boys were watching eagerly from the window that looked into the street. Marguerite was busy giving the final adjustment to the pleasant parlour, where the evening meal was laid out;—it was rather substantial, for none of them had been able to eat during the day, in the joyful bustle of preparation that prevailed. The house had been freshly painted—there were flowers in profusion, which the children had gathered from far and near, and the new household comforts—which Marguerite's economies had realised, were brought into use for the first time. A large easy chair, covered with old gilt-leather for papa, which Marguerite had bought a great bargain, and a shaded lamp

on a stand beside it, were two great features.

The curtains were new, and the chairs and tables shone like looking-glass—the boys had on their best clothes, and Marguerite the daughter, dressed in a light India-pattern chintz, with blue ribbons on her neck and confining her hair, was the picture of what her mother had been at her age. As to Marguerite herself, though her gown was only of black serge, she looked as if she were going to Court; to be sure her lawn handkerchief and ruffles were miracles of fine linen, and her cap was trimmed with lace of her own making, a kind for which she had become almost celebrated; it was in great request on account of the limited quantity she could produce.

She was now a specimen of calm, matronly beauty—her figure had developed into a noble presence—a certain majestic gravity had replaced her youthful grace—it was the matured fruit which had fulfilled

the promise of the blossom — her hair was still luxuriant, and as black as ebony, not a thread of silver was to be discerned amongst its wavy shining braids. A few lines, marked as with a diamond pen, might be discerned on the fair, smooth brow ; but she was still most lovely—the expression of her face was more harmonious than of old—she now looked like what she was—a woman, whose heart had found rest.

At last the gate of the court was heard to open, the youngest boy shouted that papa was come, and rushed out to meet him ; but Marguerite's heart misgave her—she knew by the sound of his footsteps that all was not right with him.

Paul, however, looked nearly as usual, and Marguerite tried to think that a long walk in the heat of the day might be enough to account for what had raised her fear.

The meal was joyous and noisy, the two boys scarcely allowed any voices but their

own to be heard, as they detailed all the wonderful things that had happened during their father's absence. Toward the end of the repast, papa was called on to cut a large, highly-adorned cake, which was the great ornament of the table, and the production of the united genius of the family—the mother had made it, and the three children had dressed its ornaments. A motto of doggerel rhymes by Maurice, the youngest boy, was emblazoned on a flag, which floated proudly from the summit—they were to the effect that this was the twentieth wedding-day, and hoping that there might be a thousand more.

After the table was cleared, there were all the “surprises” that had been got up for papa. Then the prizes the boys had gained at school—their prize recitations to repeat—the events of the last half-year—their own scrapes and those of their schoolfellows; finally, papa was dragged away to the garden, to see the won-

derful things that had been done there, and this ended in a riotous game of play, in which Paul seemed as much a boy as either of the others.

Whilst this was going on in the dusk of the summer evening, Marguerite had lit the lamp and brought out her work, placing her own peculiar chair beside the one intended for Paul.

The eldest boy had arrived to join the family *fête*; his master had not been able to spare him earlier, on account of pressing business, which involved a great deal of extra copying of law papers. Mr. Nogaret, the *fiancé* of the younger Marguerite had arrived also, and the young girl's heart beat with some trepidation, because he had received her mother's sanction to speak to her father about their marriage, to fix the day for the ceremony.

These grown-up members of the family waited peacably, till the young ones should have had

their lawful share of papa's first evening at home, and be dispatched to bed. They went reluctantly enough, poor boys, they would have liked to sit and hear what their elders were going to talk about, but their sister was peremptory, and they knew well that there was no mitigation of their sentence to be hoped for; their mother, however, gave them some soft comforting words and a large slice of cake to take up stairs in their hands.

Paul flung himself in the chair beside Marguerite, wiping his forehead after his exertions—then followed the discussion of family matters.

M. Nogaret made his request for an early celebration of his marriage—his house was ready—his business good—but he avowed he should not be able to give his mind to it as he ought until Marguerite was his. He was a young man of whom Paul was very fond, not brilliant, but with a great deal of character, a good solid judgment, and, above all, a

loving and affectionate heart. Paul was quite satisfied to confide his daughter's future happiness to his care.

M. Nogaret proposed, when his brother-in-law's time should be out with his master to take him into partnership, and both the young men were full of their future prospects, and discussed them with all the zest and eagerness which the sense of being their own masters inspired.

Paul and Marguerite consented that the marriage should take place that day six weeks, there was no reason why it should be longer delayed—the young people knew each other well—the matter had been settled during Paul's last visit, and M. Nogaret had been making all his preparations in the meanwhile;—nevertheless, Marguerite's eyes were full of tears as she gave her consent, and realised that her daughter was so soon to pass away from her.

The clock struck eleven, and both the

young men rose to depart. Marguerite went up stairs with her daughter to give her her blessing, and the wise, loving sympathy that only mothers can give.

She returned to the sitting-room, and her own share of the evening was now beginning. Paul and Marguerite were at last alone.

“Paul, what is it that is oppressing you?” said Marguerite, bringing her chair closer to him, taking one of his hands in both of hers.

Paul did not reply, his eyes were gloomily staring straight before him.

“Paul, speak to me, I have the right to know your troubles—they are my own.”

Still, there came no reply; but the same fixed look, and a twitching in the cheek, which Marguerite knew betokened strong emotion.

“Paul speak to me!”—the tone thrilled through him, and the next moment he had sunk upon the ground beside her, and flung

himself into the arms that closed round him—then hiding his face in her bosom, the strong man burst into an agony of tears.

Marguerite strained him closer to her breast, she lavished on him caresses such as she would have given to her child, her own tears falling silently all the time.

At last, Paul became calm—the passionate emotion was exhausted.

“Paul, tell me what it is,” whispered his wife.

Paul looked up mournfully into her face, as it bent over him—it was the gaze with which a dying man might try to fix upon his soul the last look of love that would meet his eyes in this world.

“What is it that you can dread to tell me, Paul? my darling, speak to me. I can bear anything but to see you thus.”

Paul took both her hands, knelt down beside her, and said in a low humble voice:—

“Marguerite, you have much to forgive me

—listen and see whether I have not exceeded even your love.

“In my early youth, I was, as you know, a soldier. When all my hopes in this life had been made desolate I studied as a physician, that I might minister amongst the poor—I became a monk—I entered the order of the Petite St. Antoine ; it is not an enclosed order, and the brethren are employed in the service of the hospital and in visiting the sick poor.

“I suppose I mistook my vocation, and too impatiently entered on a course which needs some higher motive than the mere disgust of life—I chose it because it seemed like the death that my soul longed for, but which I might neither seek nor find.

“I did my duty, however, in the state I embraced, so far as a mortal man may say it. One night, I saw a young girl leave an apothecary’s shop, and in attempting to cross the street she was in danger from a carriage, the

horses were upon her—when I was able to save her. I saw her but for a moment—it was *you*, Marguerite ;—you looked like her whom I had lost—Marguerite, from that time I engaged in a search for you. At last I saw you, I visited you, I found you in sorrow—I was able to be of service to you—I had then no thought of what you were to be for me—I thought only of helping and protecting you.

“ When I next was able to go to you I found you gone—the story I heard left no doubt, but that you and your father had been trepanned into some snare. Again I sought you, and after a weary time I again found you ; by that time I knew that I loved you, and I was separated from you by vows, from which there was no dispensation. Marguerite, I never told you anything of all this, only I tried to win your love to myself, and I resolved that if I could succeed, half of each year should be given to the convent and the other half to you.—I felt strong and confident that I could

ward off all danger from you, and steer our course through any difficulties ; you accepted my secret and never sought to penetrate it, nor to hinder me in any way. At last I am overtaken in my course, I am helpless and baffled before a difficulty I can neither meet nor avoid.

“The Prior of the order, a very aged man, past eighty, has resolved to resign his office ; a Chapter was held yesterday, and I was elected to fill his place. I cannot refuse the honour ; my position in the convent is such that I must either accept it or throw away my frock and abandon the place altogether. My vows to the convent were taken before I took up my other obligations—I cannot hold both. Marguerite, I am a miserable man—I have told you all—you now know my secret. It has at last worked itself to light—judge for me what I ought to do.”

Paul had throughout spoken in a dry, even suppressed voice ; but these last words were

wrung from him with a groan that came from the depths of his soul. He did not dare to look up to her, but hid his face in her lap.

Marguerite kept silence—to all appearance she was calm—but it was the calm of death or despair—a bolt of ice had passed through her—she was not surprised—the truth had come to her with a strangely familiar sound—it seemed as if she must have always known it; at last she said, in a voice so hollow and unlike her own, that Paul started!

“Are you then a PRIEST, Paul?”

“No, Marguerite—I am not.”

“Thank God for that!” said she, with a sigh of relief; “If you had lived these twenty years in such mortal sin, I must have died of the knowledge.”

“There has been no sacrilege,” said Paul, drily; “if that is what you mean, our marriage will not brand our children, nor bar them of any of their rights. I alone have

incurred any penalty in this matter, if it should ever be known. Marguerite !” said he again, after a pause, which she did not break ; “ Marguerite, do you hate me ? ”

“ No, Paul, how could you think that for a moment ? If there has been sin, I am glad that I have shared it, so that if any punishment comes I may share that also. But when must you decide ? when ought you to be at your convent ? ”

“ If I go at all, it must be at once ; the election will be to-morrow.”

Marguerite uttered a cry of anguish—she put her arms round Paul’s neck, and the two miserable beings lifted up their voice and wept together.

Marguerite was the first to recover some calmness.

“ Listen, Paul,” said she, disengaging herself from him. “ Let us imagine that it is a sudden death which has overtaken

us; it might have come and divided us in the years when we were so happy; you must return to your convent, and I will live your widow; I dare not keep you now that I know your secret."

"Do you shrink from me already?" said Paul, bitterly.

"No—no—you know that it is not so. I cannot reason, but I feel what you ought to do—the past cannot be taken away from us."

"Marguerite, I am weak," said Paul, raising his pale, haggard face, and blood-shot eyes; "I have no faith; tell me again that you love me, that this wretched secret has not made you despise me."

"It has only shewn me how much more you have loved me than I ever knew before. But you must not stay—you must go back to the service you had taken on yourself before you knew me."

Again there were tears, and groans, and

dumb caresses ; it was the bitterness of death, but the very intenseness destroyed the power to feel or suffer further.

“ Oh, Paul, I could have parted from you better ten years ago than now—we had not grown together as we are now.”

“ I will see you again, Marguerite—this is not the last time.”

“ Where?—when? ” she gasped.

“ In three days at the furthest—perhaps before.”

He stood up as he spoke. Marguerite rose too ; for a brief moment he held her clasped in his arms, and then placed her unconscious form in a chair ; without trusting himself with another glance he left the house.

The word had been spoken ; henceforth, he had neither wife nor children—he had been bereaved of all in a single day.

CHAPTER XIV.

MARGUERITE had to endure, as best she might, the questions and clamorous grief of the boys when they came down to breakfast and found their father gone.

Directly after breakfast Marguerite saw, with dismay, a certain M. Perrin come in. This M. Perrin was a neighbour to whom, in the earlier years of his residence, Paul had shown great kindness during the illness of his little daughter, and Marguerite had been indefatigable in nursing her, for there was no mother. M. Perrin had taken a great affection both for Paul and Marguerite, and although the elective affinities were not very strong in the first instance, yet constant neighbourly

intercourse, and the intimacy of the children, who were all fond of Jeannette Perrin, had brought it to pass, that M. Perrin considered himself the friend of the house, a distinction of which he was rather proud.

What M. Perrin had formerly been nobody knew; he was now an elderly man, lame, in consequence of an accident, and living, as he averred, upon *des rentes viagères*. He had common, insignificant features, but a look of shrewd caustic intelligence redeemed his hard, narrow forehead, and stubbly red hair. He had a peculiar way of listening to whatever was told him which, without his asking a single question, had the effect of making the speaker say a great deal more than was at first intended, and, indeed, if there were a secret or a reserve, it was at last lifted out of its concealment without its unlucky possessor being able to say why or how he had come to tell it. There was a peculiar magnetism in his look, which induced the most reluctant

to make a clean breast to him, literally because they could not help it. It was akin to the power by which some serpents are said to draw their prey into their jaws.

He would have been a formidable neighbour for Paul and Marguerite, if Paul had not given him such ample information about the nature of his business, and the reason for his yearly absence from home, that M. Perrin believed there was nothing more to learn.

Marguerite had always an indefinable dread of being alone with M. Perrin; for after he was gone she was sure to find that she had been induced to tell him something or other she had determined to keep to herself, generally some trifling matter of no great consequence, but it was the manner in which he had got it out of her that was provoking.

It may be imagined that she would on this particular morning rather have seen anybody enter the parlour than Monsieur Perrin. He

saluted her, and sat down in the gilt-leather chair which had been consecrated to Paul's especial service, and resting his stick against the side of the mantel-piece, he evidently came prepared for a long call. Marguerite bent over her work; she had to study not to appear too indifferent, nor too much out of spirits at her husband's unexpected departure.

"So I hear my friend Paul has given you the slip. How has that come to pass? You counted he was coming home to stay, did you not?"

Marguerite replied that she certainly had expected him to remain his usual time, but that he had not been able to conclude his business; he had come home, not to disappoint the children of their fête, but had been obliged to go back immediately.

"How long will he be absent?"

Marguerite did not know in the least.

She felt his keen grey eyes upon her, and,

conscious that she could ill sustain his scrutiny, would have given the world to have spoken in a natural tone, and tried to think what she would have said if the facts had really been as she represented them, but she only grew more and more nervous. At last he got up and lounged round the room, humming a song, the refrain of which was—“*Je n'en puis rien comprendre.*”

Marguerite looked up hastily; he was holding one of the boys' specimens of algebra, so his song might have reference to that, and Marguerite hoped it was so.

At length M. Perrin took his departure, but only to be followed at intervals by the whole neighbourhood, who came to welcome Paul home, and to consult him. To all Marguerite told the same story, and with such curious success that before night she almost began to believe in the truth of it. She clung to Paul's promise that he would see her again in three days; this one point was a star of

hope; with that prospect she could not feel utterly wretched.

On the second day after his departure Marguerite received a letter, dated from a town, the first stage of the journey to Blois, it was as follows :—

“DEAR MARGUERITE,

“On reaching this place I was taken extremely ill, with what I fear is a pleurisy. Come to me as soon as you receive this. I am at the Etoile Blanche.

“PAUL.”

The characters were traced with apparent difficulty; Marguerite could scarcely have recognised the hand. There was a scrap enclosed, which said :—

“Show this letter. I am not ill. I await you here.”

Marguerite knew this was the death-warrant to all her happiness, and till that instant she did not know how much she had hoped.

M. Perrin came up the court in front, and knocked at the door; hastily she tore the enclosure into small pieces, and flung them into the grate. She had scarcely resumed her seat when he entered; she felt as though he must surely suspect her.

"Well, Madame Marguerite! I see you have had a letter—good news I hope? Ah! crying; why, what is the matter?"

Marguerite gave him the letter; he examined it carefully, and then read it.

"Ah! this is a bad business," he said, in tones of real concern; "I am sorry, very sorry. Can I do anything to help you?"

"You are very good. I must go directly; if you will see to the boys whilst I am away."

"Aye, aye! and Marguerite shall come and stop with Jeannette and me till you return; make yourself easy. But how do you go?"

Marguerite owned she had not thought; perhaps there is some direction on the other

side of the letter. Marguerite turned sick with fear, lest there should be any further memorandum; she eagerly stretched out her hand; he gave her a half glance, and turned the letter over.

“Ha! yes, on the other side of the page there is, ‘Diligence starts from Messageries Royales, at five p.m.’ That is better written than the rest. I would know that for his hand anywhere. Get ready, and I will go with you, and see you safe. I would not mind going with you all the way, if you thought it would do any good.”

“Oh, no thank you—no! if you will see me into the Diligence it will be most kind, and all I can allow.”

The preparations for departure did not take long. Marguerite was ready long before it was time to go, for the Diligence did not leave until five o’clock.

M. Perrin was very kind. He relieved Marguerite from all anxiety about leaving her

children. At first Marguerite had shrunk from telling them the nature of their father's letter, but she knew the heavy tidings in store for them, and it was necessary they should, in some degree, be prepared.

Her daughter was, of course, urgent to accompany her. Marguerite's refusal was stern. It was the protest of her nature against the miserable deception that was being carried out.

At last, under the escort of M. Perrin, Marguerite was safe in the Diligence, and then all other thoughts were absorbed in that of being about to see Paul once more. That it would be for the *last* time mattered not. At the moment she felt only that when the Diligence stopped, Paul would be waiting to receive her.

CHAPTER XV.

It was near nine o'clock when the Diligence arrived. Marguerite's heart stood still.

"Shall I assist you to alight, madame?" said the conducteur; "do you expect any one one to meet you? Can I serve you in anything?"

Marguerite descended amongst the group of people standing round—there was no Paul.

"Can I be of service to you in any way? Apparently madame is a stranger; the person she expected is not here?"

"I must go to the Etoile Blanche—is it near?"

“A step only. I will have the honour, if madame will permit me, to conduct her there myself whilst the horses are changed; the landlady is my very good friend.”

The gallant conductor carried her modest luggage. The Etoile Blanche was a small *auberge* on the outskirts of the town, but not far from the place where the Diligence stopped.

A good-looking, buxom woman, in a short striped petticoat, snowy cap, and gold earrings, was standing at the door, and looking up the street in their direction; one of them was apparently an expected and welcomed guest; but it was not Marguerite.

“Ah! Marinette, there you are; always handsome, and always good,” said the conductor, greeting her in a way that left no doubt of their being very good friends indeed.

Marinette was, however, rather reserved towards him; the presence of Marguerite

cooling her reception to the point required by her notion of decorum.

To Marguerite's inquiry whether she could be accommodated with a room, the landlady, turning her back on the somewhat crest-fallen conducteur, replied :—

“But yes, madame, we have one at your service—a charming room—a gentleman occupied it till an hour ago, when he departed for Paris. He has been here two days. How fortunate that madame did not arrive yesterday ; she looks so amiable, it would have distressed me not to be able to make her as happy as she deserves !”

She was tripping away into the house when the conducteur said—

“Adieu, then, Marinette, I shall be gone before your return,” adding, in an injured tone, “you might have been a little kinder, I think.”

Marinette looked back over her shoulder, gave him a glance out of her large black eyes,

which went, as it was intended, straight to his heart; but she said, in a tone of provoking good humour, and aggravating amiability :—

“ Good night, then, M. le conducteur. This way madame; give yourself the trouble of following me; there is a step,” her voice was lost in the distance, and the poor conducteur stood looking blankly up the passage where she had disappeared.

The landlady conducted Marguerite into a small room on the ground-floor. The traces of recent habitation were visible. A rude oak table in the centre of the room had writing-materials upon it; a chair pushed back, as though the occupant had hastily risen from it. The landlady bustled about to restore order, and talked incessantly the whole time.

“ The poor man, he certainly had some chagrin on his mind; he did nothing but write; he did not eat enough to keep alive a sparrow, but he paid nobly; he had dressed

a bad wound on the servant's hand, which she gave herself whilst cutting wood, and from which she must have bled to death if he had not been on the spot; she was in bed, which was the reason why madame found things in disorder, but madame looked so good she would excuse it. The gentleman had ordered Susanne to be quite quiet for a day or two."

The noise made by the pattering of the landlady's *sabots* on the brick-floor, her constant chatter in a high-pitched key, irritated Marguerite's nerves past endurance. What was the gentleman to her, and yet there was an unacknowledged resemblance to Paul in the landlady's description which turned her heart sick; but Paul had promised to see her again; Marguerite clung desperately to that promise.

"Madame is proceeding further to-morrow?" said the landlady, in an inquiring tone, as she energetically prepared the bed

that stood in a sort of alcove raised a step above the floor.

“I don’t know. I came here to meet my husband,” said Marguerite, hardly conscious of what she said.

“Ah! and you expected him to be here already; but madame must keep up a good heart; will he travel on horseback, or by Diligence?”

Marguerite did not know. She stood at the window which gave upon the street; the sun had long since set; it was growing dusk; she stood looking and listening, but Paul came not.

The landlady had departed to attend to some call for her presence in another part of the house. Half an hour had passed since her arrival; but Marguerite was stupified with the intensity of expectation, and did not know whether hours or minutes had passed over her.

At last steps approached the door of her

room—she heard the landlady's voice saying—
“this way—come this way;” Marguerite
gasped for breath, it must be, it *could* be
no other than Paul.

The door was thrown open; the landlady,
entered, carrying a flaring candle, followed by
some one in a riding-hat and cloak. Margue-
rite, blinded by the glare, could discern no-
thing more.

“Doubtless this is for you, madame; the
good man says he was ordered to ride as for
his life, and to deliver it to the lady who
would be at the Etoile Blanche. He was to
give it into her own hands.

The man came forwards—he was a stout
countryman—and held out a packet.

Marguerite saw that it was addressed to
herself in Paul's handwriting; she took it
mechanically.

“It is all right then, is it?” said the man.

“Yes, I am the person for whom it is
intended.”

“Good! then I have nothing more to do. The gentleman paid me. I suppose I may go?”

The man stood stolidly waiting, and twirling his hat, as if waiting for some contradiction. The landlady stood, looking half-curious, half-sympathetic.

“Shall I give the good man his *pour boire*, and save madame the trouble? doubtless she is in haste to read her letter, I hope it brings good news. Marguerite sat gazing on the paquet and had heard nothing; but now raising her head said, “give him what is right, only go now.”

The landlady, with some importance, made a sign to the man to go—she herself lingered; but Marguerite relapsed into her abstraction, and took no notice; reluctantly the good woman followed the messenger to glean what intelligence she could from him.

Marguerite opened the paquet, she knew

almost without the process of thought what it all meant, but her despair had become mild—for the time she was past feeling. The first thing she saw was a letter addressed to herself. The bulk of the *pacquet* was in another enclosure, carefully tied and sealed up.

The letter was as follows :—

“Marguerite, forgive me; my heart has failed. I cannot see you again. You are on your way to me at this moment, but I cannot endure the agony of another parting. Marguerite—my beloved—my wife—my idol, I write as a dying man; at this moment all the mists and self-deception of my past life clear off, and for a little while I see what I have been. Oh! Marguerite, forgive me, for I have done you great wrong. I had no right to take your life, and link it to my own, which was already dedicated to another purpose, and to which I was bound

by vows from which I had no power to dispense myself; vows, which have re-asserted their power over me, and the claims of which you recognised. But, Marguerite, I loved you so much; I felt so strong in my own strength to overcome and trample down all obstacles, and *now* I am like an exhausted swimmer, the waves pass over me, and I have no more strength to wrestle with them. I am carried far out to sea where no help can come. Pardon, Marguerite, if I speak of myself; it is the last time I shall have a living, faithful, human heart to repose upon. There is no shadow betwixt us now; but there is the cold, calm darkness of death where no light shines. Marguerite, I am powerless to utter the love I bear you. It has taken its root in the depths of my life; all these years have bound us together till we are one. Oh! Marguerite, I could have better parted from you when I brought you home a bride than now. Marguerite, let this be your consolation,

that I love you perfectly. You have never done an act, or said one word I would have wished undone. Oh! Marguerite, I love you,—it is all the atonement I can make—I love you. Will you not forgive me? I do not mean now; at the moment you read this your heart will be all too full of pain; I mean when time shall have tired down your anguish, and you are at leisure to judge the past. Oh! Marguerite, then remember me with mercy. I love you.

“Marguerite, pray for me.—Pray for me every morning.—Pray that I may at least be faithful in the office I have taken, for I tell you, Marguerite, that it is not alone the wrenching agony of parting from you, but it is the horrible doubt whether in this last act of my life I have done right.

“Was I not bound to you and to our children before all other things? My whole life is shattered into fragments. You, beloved, are at least left whole; you decided bravely,

promptly, and without reserve, on the course to be taken. Your pure and noble life, clear as crystal, is not shivered by any wedge of doubting; you are at unity within yourself. Your great grief will mellow into a noble sorrow, it will elevate your life, for you will seek no weak or ignoble consolation, you have to bear sorrow now, but it will bear you up hereafter. You have no reproach to make yourself. Wife and mother, you are alike perfect. Marguerite, recollect you have never given me one instant pain or the most passing wish that you should have been other than you are. For you, both the past and the present are pure.

“But for me—oh, Marguerite! evil has most justly overtaken me; the only reality I cling to in this hour is my love for you; all else is drifting sand and darkness. I have no hope, doubt has laid hold upon me; only, my Marguerite, let this be some comfort to you that the decision (be it right or wrong) which has

been followed out at the cost of such bitter pain to you shall be thoroughly redeemed.

“I will, if God will help me, be at least faithful in the calling I have elected. I will do the best a man may do, and any strength or unity of purpose I may retain I shall owe to you. You made the election for me, and I will not be unworthy of the martyrdom you have had the courage to endure. But pray for me Marguerite—pray always, for I have no more strength, or courage, or knowledge left than if it were indeed the actual grave to which I am descending.

“God bless you, and keep you, Marguerite, spirit, soul, and body. Amen.

“PAUL.”

This letter was dated that very morning, written from the parlour of the “Etoile Blanche,” the very spot where Marguerite was now

sitting ; and an awe as of the tomb came over her, as though the spirit of her husband hovered yet upon the air.

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CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN she came to open the sealed packet, Marguerite found a sum of money ample for all her occasions, and a memorandum of directions from Paul; there was a sealed letter addressed to M. Perrin, and a packet labelled "my will"—there were the certificates properly attested of decease and interment—on the enclosure was written, "in the south corner of the cemetery, I placed three large stones beside a new-made grave."

Everything that the most thoughtful love and minute care could do towards saving her as much as possible from the details of the subterfuge had been done; she was to remain a week at the "Etoile Blanche" and then return

to Paris, writing first to announce the fatal intelligence.

The week passed over, and Marguerite was less miserable than she could have imagined possible.

Sitting the day long beside that “new-made grave,” she had realised all the difference betwixt life and death—Paul was gone away, and she had no hope of ever seeing him again—but he had not undergone that great mysterious *change*, that separates those we have loved and lost from our *nature*, as well as from our sight.

Paul still lived—he was still belonging to this breathing world—she could think of him—she could “pray for him every morning,” as he would for her—it was the six months’ absences of old prolonged—not made irrevocable as in death—unexpressed, unrecognised even by herself, was the *possibility* that always lies in life. He would even be in the same city with her. The indomitable power of comfort

that the soul finds in its extremity is wonderful.

But when, attended by her kind landlady, she was once more placed in the diligence to return to that home now desolate and chill, where she might never expect him, and where, though so near, he might never come, her sorrow was as heavy as she could bear.

M. Perrin and her eldest son met her when the diligence stopped—the sight of the widow's garb affected them both very much, and for some moments their sobs were uncontrolled—even the bystanders were touched. M. Perrin had a coach in waiting and hurried her into it. In spite of the detective-police element in his character, M. Perrin was a very kind-hearted man—he had really loved and revered Paul, and the news of his death was a severe shock to him.

Marguerite's daughter and her two children were at home to receive her. M. Perrin went

away, and the family remained alone with their grief.

Marguerite had given M. Perrin the letter and will, and the other documents, and the next morning, directly after breakfast, he came over to her.

Marguerite had now to go through her part.

M. Perrin asked many questions, requiring details of Paul's last moments—his last words, and all the minutiae which it soothes surviving friends to speak about and to recollect.

Marguerite hitherto had realised nothing beyond the grief of separation from her husband; all these small details of falsehood were repugnant to her—they degraded the sanctity of her sorrow. Fortunately, M. Perrin's own honest grief made him less critical than usual—but it was astonishing how the most casual and natural inquiry involved details of falsehood, which seemed to multiply to an extent that sickened and bewildered the hapless Mar-

guerite. The thought that it was she who had counselled and induced Paul to the step he had taken, and that all these lies were to save his secret in all its integrity, alone nerved her with strength ; but she felt that the weight of the task had fallen to her lot.

Paul had made it his especial desire that the marriage of his daughter should take place at the period originally fixed, and M. Perrin, as trustee and executor of the will, was requested to overrule all objections.

The care of the younger children was confided to Marguerite, but M. Perrin was entreated to be her adviser and assistant.

M. Perrin was greatly gratified at the trust reposed in him—the affairs, having been left in the exactest order, did not entail much trouble ; but, to do him justice, he would willingly have undertaken any amount of trouble—no one could have proved himself a more prompt, active, and efficient friend than he did at this time.

The news of Paul's death had caused a great sensation in his immediate neighbourhood. All who had known him felt it as a personal sorrow, and Marguerite was besieged by the sympathising neighbours, who came anxious to hear the minutest particulars of the sad event and to offer their condolences, which, as they were, of course, highly inapplicable to the actual case, were singularly irksome, and Marguerite's heart sickened between her real grief and false position.

The preparations for the marriage, however, diverted attention in some measure ; for though it was to be celebrated in the quietest manner, no marriage ever yet could be celebrated without a great deal of stitching and sewing, and the preparations for beginning housekeeping could not be dispensed with.

The neighbours testified their respect for Paul by their liberality to his daughter—no young bride in her position ever had a fairer show of household linen-drapery, or a more

shining display on her kitchen shelves. M. Perrin presented what small articles of plate were required—the bridegroom's relations were very liberal, and Marguerite felt a mother's pride in seeing how handsomely her daughter would be set up in the world.

The marriage-day came at last, and went off admirably—it was quiet—no guests, except M. Perrin and his daughter were invited, and in spite of the gloom of the recent event, the bride and bridegroom were obstinately happy—the boys had recovered their spirits, and even Marguerite was sensible of an immense relief—she had felt a heavy, undefined fear of she scarcely knew what—the atmosphere of falsehood she had lately breathed had made her a coward—but in her daughter's marriage and her prospect of happiness she once more emerged into truth and reality.

It might be about two months since the tidings of Paul's death, and a week after

the marriage, that the accident of being pre-occupied in his mind, caused M. Perrin to take the wrong turning as he was walking along; he was a long way from home, and in a quarter he seldom visited; he did not perceive his mistake until he entered the rue St. Antoine.

He looked round—it did not make much difference—he continued his route—he was thinking sadly of his poor friend, Paul Créqui. The sound of music reached his ears—he was passing the church of the convent of the Petit St. Antoine — mass was going on — the thought struck him that he would go in and say a prayer for the soul of Paul Créqui.

He entered, crossed himself, bent his knee and advanced up the aisle. The brothers were all in their places round the altar. The astonishment and dismay of M. Perrin may be imagined when, in the Prior, who sat in his full robes of office, occupying a

sort of throned chair, he recognised — Paul Créqui himself!

M. Perrin never removed his eyes from him till the service was ended—then, when the brothers filed off to the side door that led into the convent he followed. The Prior had already commenced to disrobe when M. Perrin entered the vestry—his back was towards the door—M. Perrin came close behind him and said :—

“How do you do, Paul Créqui?”

Paul turned suddenly round ; on confronting M. Perrin, a dark look came over his face ; but recovering himself, he said coldly to the attendants who were taking his robes :—

“What does that person want here?”

“But, Paul Créqui, you know me—you were said to have died two months ago—I saw your widow not two hours ago—what do *you* want here?”

“The man is drunk or mad, put him out,” said Paul, sternly.

The two attendant monks began to hustle poor M. Perrin and to push him to the door ; —he resisted.

“ I will not go till your Prior explains how it happens—”

M. Perrin's further expostulation was cut short by the violent manner in which he was pushed out of the vestry into the church, and flung down on the pavement. The disturbance roused the attention of the door-keeper and his assistants, who reproached him for making a disturbance in the church, accusing him of being drunk, and poor M. Perrin, foaming with rage, which made his efforts to speak entirely inarticulate, was thrust out of the church into the street.

He was in an evil plight; not only were his clothes torn, but his *perruque* had been lost in the struggle, and his three-cornered hat entirely spoiled—his nose bled from the blows that had been liberally bestowed, and every bone in his body ached with bruises.

People in the street turned round to look at him; a crowd soon formed, which jeered him without mercy. Poor M. Perrin went along blind with rage; at last a coach passed, which he hailed, and escaped from the scene of his disasters, vowing to be revenged on the Prior, the whole convent, and on Marguerite, who must have been privy to the whole proceeding.

As soon as he was rehabilitated M. Perrin went to Marguerite; he entered with a look of sinister good humour, which she did not note. She rose cheerfully to meet him, and greeted him cordially as usual.

M. Perrin was exasperated at having been the dupe of a good feeling; he resented the recollection of his own friendliness and was indignant for himself. Marguerite's kindness only made matters worse, and her grave, pain-worn face only hardened his heart against her.

"Pray, madame," he began, with sneering

politeness ; “ may I venture to inquire when your husband died ? and where ? and may I ask to see again, those certificates you once so obligingly shewed to me.”

“ M. Perrin ? ” said Marguerite, with a look of her old haughtiness.

“ Yes, madame, you may look, if you please ; but I have the honour of telling you, that I do not believe one word of all you told me. I have this morning seen your husband, M. Paul Créqui, and by his orders I was thrown into the streets, like a mangy cur.”

“ M. Perrin, I insist on knowing what you mean.”

“ I mean this, madame ; that being this morning in the rue St. Antoine, I turned into the church of the Petit St. Antoine, when mass was going on, to offer up a prayer for the soul of my friend, Paul Créqui, for whom I was fool enough to grieve, and the first thing I saw was Paul Créqui, your husband, madame, sitting there enthroned as Prior—I

spoke to him, and he ordered his myrmidons to turn me out, which they did; but I will expose him yet!"

"M. Perrin, you *must* be mistaken," said Marguerite, turning deadly faint.

"No, madame, I am *not* mistaken. When I have once seen a man, I know him again anywhere, and under any disguise. I belonged for many years to the secret police, and I was noted for never having been once mistaken in the identity of any man, no matter how subtle he might be; I tell you, madame, I have been the means of bringing twenty criminals to justice, when they had eluded all search; to tell *me* I can be mistaken! no, madame, the truth commends itself to us at once; all that has ever struck me as strange is explained now; as a monk he had liberty, which as Prior he cannot have, and a convenient widowhood smoothed all difficulties. I make you both my compliments in the skill with which you have played

your parts. But I have not done with him yet."

"M. Perrin!" said Marguerite, with courageous dignity, "if you are struck with sudden insanity I forgive your delusion; but it is not manly to come here to outrage my grief, which, policeman as you may be, you must know and feel is not feigned; I wish you good morning."

M. Perrin was cowed by the haughty sorrow of her expression; he felt himself wonderfully little before her. He would have asked her pardon, but there was a stern contempt in her face that he did not dare to brave. He picked up his hat and went away, thinking that perhaps for the first time in his life he *might* have been mistaken. He determined to go once more to the church of the Petit St. Antoine.

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CHAPTER XVII.

So soon as the disturbance caused by the entrance and ejection of M. Perrin had subsided, Paul, who had remained cold and passive in the same attitude, gazing with absent eyes on the proceedings, gave the signal to his monks and retired from the vestry. He made no allusion to the incident, either then or afterwards, and his stern rule made convent gossip flow with a very restrained current.

Paul had, during the few weeks of his rule, restored and strengthened the convent discipline. All the old statutes and rules had been diligently sought out and collated ; their injunctions were rigidly enforced.

The lazy, profligate monks, dreaded the justice which he meted out without mercy; but Paul had appealed to the archbishop, and the archbishop had strengthened his hands; however much the monks might be disposed to rebel, they knew it was of no avail; their new Prior had both the power and the will to enforce submission.

Paul's nature seemed to have undergone a change—he had torn up his heart by its deepest fibres—his human life was dead—he had sacrificed all for his convent, and he determined that it should become the perfection of monkhood. His last struggle had left him hard and inflexible; his indomitable will—his love of power and domination, his impatience of all negligence and disorder, were not now kept in check by the benevolence that had tempered them.

The reforms he introduced were good in themselves; but, holding as he did the reins of power, Paul was unconscious of the great

severity of the curb he used, and the transition from almost unchecked license to the strictest rule was almost beyond human endurance. Paul visited on his monks the sacrifice he had made to become their ruler. His own personal purity and the austerity of his own manners, gave the disaffected no handle against him ; but their number increased daily and their hatred was beyond all utterance.

Affairs were in this state when the smouldering discontent burst into a flame, through an ill-judged act of severity.

A case of flagrant profligacy came to light, which implicated one of the most influential of the monks ; had it been dealt with by secular authority, the probability is that he would have been hanged. Paul adjudicated and condemned the offender to a week in the *cachôt*—a punishment on the rolls of the convent but one that had never been inflicted during the memory of any living monk.

The *cachôts* were two dungeons formed in the thickness of the buttresses, at the very foundation of the building. A trap-door in the floor of the largest vault disclosed a flight of steps ; these led to a short, narrow passage, ending with two grated iron doors—the doors of the *cachôts* ; no ray of daylight had ever pierced their gloom—no sound of outer life had ever reached their stillness.

Those entrusted with the task of opening the rusted entrance to these regions of darkness, shrank back appalled. In a body the monks, subdued and trembling, prostrated themselves before the Prior, to entreat a remission of the terrible doom.

Paul was well pleased to see the effect of his severity, but no relenting was in his soul.

He sternly bade the monks withdraw and ponder on the example, lest punishment should fall on them likewise.

Trembling and silent they retired ; but

they made another effort on behalf of their unfortunate brother.

There was a young novice, the only one in the community whom Paul ever seemed to regard with any complacency. He was so pure and gentle-hearted, that even his companions took no offence at his favour.

The monks sought him, and entreated he would intercede with the Prior for mercy. He had not heard either of the trial or the punishment. Paul had pity on his youth, and had assigned him a task in the library of the convent, to detain him there until all should be over.

“Will you — dare you risk your favour with the Prior in this cause?” asked an old monk.

“I will go, as Queen Esther ventured before King Ahasuerus, and I will pray to Almighty God and the Blessed Virgin, who was never known to fail those who had recourse to her—to keep me from being afraid.”

and to turn his heart to mercy. Will you say the Litany of Jesus with me before I go ? ”

The monks kneeled round him, and repeated after his clear, pure tones, the words of the Litany.

“ Now go,” said the old monk ; “ there is not a moment to lose.”

For a novice to seek the presence of his superior, unsent for, was a breach of monastic etiquette, which a martinet, such as Paul had shewn himself on all points of observance due to his office, was not likely to overlook ; but for a member of the community to raise a voice against any acts of his superior, was an offence that rendered the offender liable to severe punishment.

Paul was sitting in the room we formerly described, plunged in a gloomy reverie, when a gentle knock upon the door roused him. The order to enter was uttered in so stern a tone, that the monks who had accompanied

the novice to the threshold drew back in fear. Maurice entered, and the door closed behind him.

The poor child realised at once what he had overlooked before, the immense distance that separated a Prior from a novice; it seemed greater, more tangible at least, than the distance between him and the throne of heaven, before which he had so lately knelt.

“Mercy, father—have mercy!” he sobbed out, as he fell prostrate at Paul’s feet, and grasped the edge of his robe.

“Stand up, and let me know what it is that brings you here, unsummoned from the place where you were bidden to remain.”

The effect of the cold, passionless voice on the trembling novice, was as though a heavy hammer had descended and crushed life out of him; but with a blind desperation he continued:—

“Father, have mercy—do not send brother

Lucien alive into that horrible place—it will kill him, body and soul, and he needs repentance so much.”

He scarcely knew what he said, but he extended his hands and gazed on Paul in an agony of supplication. He had a look of one of Paul's own children—his voice and looks made Paul's heart quiver with pain; but the emotion passed away, leaving him harder than before; had he not given up his children for his office? It was with a feeling of revenge that he said slowly and calmly :—

“ My son, who gave you the right to sit in judgment on your superiors? You are guilty of sin when you question their actions, even in your thoughts; withdraw—the punishment of brother Lucien is just, and it will not be set aside. Tell my words to those who put you forwards and let them fear for themselves. If they do likewise, so likewise shall be their reward.”

There was no appeal; Paul gazed, rigid and

stony upon the trembling lips and beseeching eyes that were lifted towards him. There were no more words possible ; with his hands crossed upon his breast and his head bent low, the young novice withdrew backwards from the presence of the Prior.

The monks, who waited for him without, had no need to interrogate their ambassador. The words which he repeated struck many of those who heard them with secret terror, for they knew they were guilty of crimes that only needed discovery to subject them to punishment scarcely less terrible.

“The old Prior !” cried a voice ; “if he would intercede—he was always merciful.”

Alas, the poor old Prior was almost imbecile, and could scarcely be made to comprehend anything ; he could attend to nothing for longer than a few seconds at a time.

Like men catching at a straw, the monks next sought the nurse who had the charge of the old man. It fortunately chanced that on

this day, the gentle-hearted and too lax superior was better, more capable of sustained attention than he had been for a long time.

His attendant, who knew the best mode of speaking to him, told him the case and entreated him to interpose.

The poor old man's face assumed a look of intelligence and horror—he struck his feeble hands together, ejaculating in a pitiful tone—“*Meâ culpâ, meâ culpâ, meâ maximâ culpâ !*” It is all my doing—my sons were vile and I restrained them not—surely their sins are on my head, and from my hands will their souls be required ! Go, one of you, my brothers, to the Prior, and tell him that brother Michael requests his presence, that he may make his confession to him.”

The old man appeared to concentrate all his vitality for a final effort ; the lethargic imbecility into which he had, since his resignation, been gradually sinking, was dissipated,

and there was an air of meek and touching dignity in his aspect.

“Retire, my children, I have need of a moment for recollection and prayer. Go, all of you to the chapel, and pray for me there.”

The monks had scarcely withdrawn, when there was heard a stately tread and a rustling of robes. The Prior, in the habit of his office, entered the cell.

The old man bowed his head reverently to his superior, and made an effort to rise. The Prior made a gesture to prevent him, and gave a sign to the attendant to withdraw.

“Is it Paul, or the Prior, whose presence you have requested?” said he, gravely, when they were alone.

“Both, both. Paul, come here, I cannot rise; sit down close to me, and tell me what is this trial that has been going on about brother Lucien. There was a tone of long

accustomed command in the words. Paul sat down beside his friend, and told him briefly the crime and the punishment."

"Paul, it will not do—such punishments ought not to be—no mortal man has the right to award such doom—no man was ever thrust into those *cachôts* who came out alive and sane—they have never been opened in my memory, let them remain closed for ever—award some other penalty."

"The punishment is awarded by the rules of our order—the man is guilty, he has been justly condemned. I shall not revoke the sentence."

"Paul, Paul—I, the aged—I, your father, entreat you to be more merciful. He shall have judgment without mercy who showeth no mercy; what would become of us, if we were all to receive the just reward of our deeds, and shall mortal man be more just than God?"

"Do not agitate yourself; who has been

telling you of this? I meant to keep it from you. It is too late, I cannot go back from the word I have spoken—it would be ruin to my authority—you do not know what men these monks are.”

“ Yes, I do—they are a stiff-necked race—an evil generation; but Paul, the iniquity of my heels compasses me about—the sins of by-gone days rise up against me. It is I, who ought to be cast in that dungeon—I have been an unfaithful steward of the trust committed to me—you know it is all my fault—you always said so—have mercy on me, Paul, and forgive this man—if you will be just, *be* just—it is I who have been the author of this man’s sin.”

Paul looked irresolute for a moment, then he said, kindly and gently :

“ Every man must bear his own burden and go to his own place, none can redeem his brother from death, nor give to God a ransom for him. Nevertheless, at your entreaty,

though I may not recall the sentence, I will mitigate the penalty—in your presence I will give the order.”

He struck a gong that was against the wall.

“Bid the Sub-Prior select twelve of the brothers, and come hither.”

In a few moments, a sound outside the door indicated that the order was obeyed.

The Sub-Prior alone entered the presence; the monks remained with trembling hearts and humbly-bent countenances at the door, which remained open.

The old Prior, his hands joined and his lips moving as in prayer, occupied his large chair, wrapped in flannels and propped up with cushions. He was an old man, even amongst those who had long worn grey hair.

Beside him stood Paul, erect and dignified; the folds of his robe making his presence look more ample; his eye was stern, and beneath its glance the stubbornest of the monks quailed. He spoke in a slow, quiet voice.

“I have sent for you, that you may know our father, Michael Charles Joseph, has interceded for our rebellious son, Lucien. I may not altogether remit a sentence pronounced, not by me, but by the rulers of our order against the offence of which he has been proved to be guilty; at our father’s clement entreaty, I mitigate its severity so far, as to shorten the term of his seclusion, until the same hour the day after to-morrow at which he enters his dungeon to-day—and he shall be visited once during his seclusion; the rest of his penance remains as it was at first pronounced. Let the other brothers retire to their cells until vespers, and repeat the 119th and the seven penitential Psalms—let them pray for their brother.”

The Prior ceased to speak—the monks made their reverence and withdrew, thankful that their boldness had not been visited by any severer penance, and that at least they

had obtained a few crumbs of mercy for their brother.

As soon as they were gone Paul turned to the old man ; but he had relapsed into his dotage and mumbling his prayers, though scarcely able to hold the beads in his helpless hands.

Paul returned to his own apartment, chafed and dissatisfied; he had been induced to make a concession, and, in his present mood, a concession, however slight, was worse to him than the dungeon to which he had condemned his disobedient monk.

In a few days the convent had to all appearance, re-entered into its old calm. Brother Lucien had been taken out of his dungeon—a submissive idiot ; he had not been restored to the community, nor was he allowed even to enter the chapel ; no one spoke of him—the whole event seemed to have passed out of mind. But a deep, dull, silent hatred of their Superior filled every heart with bitterness ; there was

not a monk in the convent who did not cherish schemes of revenge, and nothing but their intense distrust of each other prevented a conspiracy against his life.

Paul knew this, and despised them—his severe rule only became more rigid than ever.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LAME man of most villainous countenance sat beside the chapel door of the Convent du Petit Saint Antoine, begging. M. Perrin, with Roman resolution in his heart, again stood at the threshold, prepared to realise any doubts he might still entertain of the Prior's identity with the husband of Marguerite.

“A penny! a penny! for the love of the Virgin; one penny, and you shall have treasure in heaven!”

M. Perrin placed a small alms in the ragged hat held before him; the beggar scrutinised his face.

"You are he who was ordered by the proud Prior to be thrown into the street like a dog. I have been watching for you ever since."

"What have you to do with me?" said M. Perrin, with dignity.

"I hate the Prior, the monks hate the Prior; and I will help you to bring him to justice. Go in now, I shall be here when you come out, or are thrust out," he added, with a grimace which indicated to M. Perrin his fall into the mire.

The man's words did not take effect, M. Perrin only fancied there was an insolent attempt to make a fool of him.

The service was proceeding when he entered; Paul, as usual, sat upon his throne. M. Perrin closely scrutinised every look and gesture; the identity was complete to his eyes, still he had known curious instances of mistaken identity. He removed from his place, and went where he could be seen.

Paul changed countenance when his eyes fell on his old neighbour—not very perceptibly, his self-control was wonderful, but the ex-police agent was now quite satisfied ; he did not wait for the conclusion of the service. The lame beggar was in his place vociferating his entreaty for pennies, promising celestial interest for them.

As M. Perrin came out he thrust his hat before him to arrest his passage, and said :—

“The monks bade me ask where you could be found. I am here to do their errands, now that they may not go abroad themselves. I was lay brother here once ; the Prior did me a mischief ; he turned me out, and I fell amongst thieves.”

“I thought I knew you again for a jail bird. I may be heard of there,” and he put a scrap of paper into the man’s hand, and went on, undetermined what course he should pursue, but on the whole inclined to let

events take their course, if it proved that he had set them in motion.

The beggar was the lay brother who, three-and-twenty years ago, had been driven away by Paul from the asylum in which he had sought to hide from justice.

Paul knew he was not safe, he had a pre-science of coming evil, but he did not know the lame beggar who sat at the chapel door, nor did he know that his monks were in league with him. He believed that he had quelled their insubordination, and fancied that his firmness in the matter of brother Lucien had been the final touch that subdued them.

Ever since the day that he interceded with Paul the poor old Prior had sunk into a torpor that scarcely differed from death; all that made life beyond merely breathing was gone; the mechanism of existence alone remained, and the action of that became feebler every day.

After service, on the day that M. Perrin had appeared a second time, Paul visited his old friend, who took no notice of him. Paul thought he was unconscious, but when he rose to go, the old man opened his eyes like one awakening, and said, in a collected voice :—

“God bless you, Paul; make your escape, there is evil determined against you, do not tarry until it overtakes you. You do not know these monks as I do. I have been dreaming; bend your head—I will tell you.”

Paul bent low to humour him; the old man whispered something—the only word Paul could distinguish was, “*wife.*”

He was stunned for a moment. A convulsive motion in the old man roused him; he saw a slight spasm quiver over the whole body; a look of earnest struggling trouble in the eyes; it passed away, and the poor old Prior was dead.

The secret of his last words of warning to Paul was, that some of the monks who were allowed access to him—secure in his apparent unconsciousness—had talked before him without reserve; in his room they deemed themselves safe.

It was long before Paul was free to seek his own chamber to grieve at liberty for the death of his old friend; it broke up hidden springs of grief; half his life lay on the bier with that old man. Till now Paul did not know how much he had loved him.

When he opened his book of "Hours" a scrap of paper, evidently placed on purpose to catch his eye, fell out.

It contained only a few words, scrawled almost illegibly, and the paper was crumpled and dirty. "Escape—do not lose a moment. Before night the Archbishop will know all. All the monks are against you but me."

That this warning was true, and that his secret was discovered, Paul did not for an

instant doubt. As little did he doubt that M. Perrin was the author of the mischief. Still the idea of flight was utterly repugnant to him—he would have preferred to stand at bay and brave the worst; but the thought of Marguerite made him tremble. What would be her fate if he were taken? He knew that there would be no mercy for him nor for her, the innocent partner of his offence. Even at this moment she might be in the power of his enemies! The thought was like fire. His resolve was taken at once.

“Let me but have this one night and to-morrow, we may defy the malice of men and monks!”

He burnt the scrap of paper at the lamp, and then sat a few moments in deep thought. When he rose his face was calm and inscrutable. He had laid the plan of his proceedings, but they could not be carried out immediately; he had two hours of delay and suspense to endure before he could attempt to leave the

convent, and in those two hours what might not happen! After all, the warning might be a trap laid for him; to be caught in an attempt to escape would be the worst fate.

He went to the Refectory where the monks were assembling for supper. He gave directions about the lying in state, the *chapelle ardente*, and the relay of those who were to watch through the night. He next went into the chapel, and remained some time in prayer beside the body of his friend.

The death of their old Prior was a great event in the monotony of convent routine, and there was much suppressed excitement. The Prior alone was calm and stern as usual; there was nothing to indicate to those who looked at him the most narrowly that he had a suspicion of aught below the surface. He superintended the arrangements of the chapel. None of the monks could tell when he was seen last. He was not missed; but the next morning when two

officials, armed with a warrant from the Archbishop, came with authority to attach the Prior, to suspend him from his functions, and to consign him to close seclusion in his own apartment, the Prior's robes were found thrown over a chair in his own room, but of the Prior himself there was not a trace.

The officials were directed to inquire into complaints that had reached the Archbishop of grave scandals and acts of misrule on the part of the Prior, the commission was of the most ample virtues, but there was no culprit to be found—Paul was gone!

The same day, at the same hour, two men stood at the door of Marguerite's house in the rue Maubert; they had a warrant to secure her person, and to take her before the ecclesiastical authorities to be examined concerning her husband, whom she asserted to be dead.

The house was empty. Marguerite had gone to visit her daughter the evening

before ; the key had been left with a neighbour.

Whilst the officials were making inquiries, and a crowd of curious people had gathered round them, Marguerite's daughter arrived in person ; her surprise was so painful that she fainted away on the spot ; nothing less fatal than that her mother had been beguiled from home by a false story, and waylaid and murdered occurred to her.

An old woman who lived at the back of Marguerite's house, and who sometimes worked for her, came up at this juncture. She was returning with her basket from market, and, of course stopped to see what the crowd meant. She was able to throw some faint light on the mystery.

"I was with Madame Crèqui last night," said she ; "I went to ask her to give me some stuff for my man's rheumatism, for she is as rare a doctor as her husband was. Whilst we were in what used to be the surgery we

heard a knock at the door, Madame Crèqui went to open it. I heard her cry out '*Oh, mon Dieu!*' A man's voice said something I could not catch. She came back to me looking pale and scared. She said she had been fetched to her daughter who was ill. She did not seem to know what she was doing; she asked me to lock up the house for her, and put on her cloak, and went out just as she was. I said it was dark, and offered to go with her, but she said the person who had come for her had brought a lantern. It took me a few minutes to make the house safe; when I came out I saw no one, and I was just now coming to see if she were returned, and to ask how her daughter was."

Paul and Marguerite had both disappeared, and left no trace behind them.

CHAPTER XIX.

ONE evening in November, 17— a respectable-looking man, and a female, who might be his wife, occupied the coupé of the diligence that went to Brussels.

The woman's face was nearly concealed by the hood of her cloak ; the man looked worn and haggard, but had a stern, resolute face.

Not a word was spoken by either, until they passed the *barrière*, when the man leaned back, and drew a deep breath of relief ; he passed his handkerchief across his face.

“ We are fortunate,” said he, “ and safe

for the present. I did not know how anxious I had been until now."

"Now, Paul, tell me what has happened, for I do not know whether I am awake or in a dream. What has come to pass?"

"The accident—the grain of sand—the merest chance which might have happened any moment during the last twenty years has overtaken me at last. I am discovered and am flying from the consequences of my own actions—it is just—very just—none but a fool would have attempted to walk in two ways."

"But at least the chance is not altogether an evil one that has restored us to each other."

"No, Marguerite; we do not meet again as we parted—a change as of the grave itself has separated me from our past life. Marguerite, since I left you I have passed a strange, terrible time; all thought of you and the children had gone out of my mind

—I was turned to stone—I felt hard and cruel—I have been an avenger of evil, struggling with evil men whom I hated, and now I am become myself a mock for them to scorn and point at. I am fallen, and my wicked monks will rejoice and strengthen themselves from my example, in doing evil. Marguerite,” he continued, after a few moments, and in a strange, mysterious, confidential tone, “I believe I died in reality when we pretended my death. I was buried in that grave I marked for you to visit, and an evil spirit was allowed to take possession of my body, and it has had possession all this time till now, and I am left chargeable with everything. I do not quite know how—I am my own self now—but not the same as yesterday. Marguerite! Marguerite!” he said, clutching her arm, and speaking in a sharp, impatient voice, “how *can* I be myself and yet another?” He put his hands to his head and shouted “Ah Perrin!” Then he became

violently agitated, started up from his seat, and endeavoured to fling himself from the window. Marguerite, though taken by surprise, was equal to the emergency; she spoke to him quite calmly, and drew him back to his seat. Suddenly his mood changed, he leaned his head upon her breast and wept bitterly.

As a mother soothes a suffering child, Marguerite caressed him; the gentle magnetism was not without its effect on the strong tempest-tossed man. Gradually he became calmer, and at length he slept. Marguerite drew her cloak over him, and so arranged herself that she could better support his weight. Several hours he slept thus, and in the midst of all her anxiety and uncertainty, Marguerite felt that a deep well of happiness had sprung up in her life which had seemed so lately a desert which could never be fertilised again.

Paul's mind had been wound up to its

extremest tension, and it had broken down under the sudden shock of discovery; whilst any thing remained to be done his long habits of self-control and decision of action had carried him through, but the moment the strain was removed, the clear mind lost its coherence, and its faculties fell into confusion.

In the dim light of a morning still struggling with night, the diligence stopped for breakfast; the yard of the *auberge* was full of rude and noisy people, all bustling and jostling about their own concerns. Paul awoke and looked confusedly round, like a man who has been struggling with an evil dream. He evidently did not recollect where he was. Marguerite spoke quietly; he still seemed drowsy; she profited by the opportunity to arrange him more commodiously; he settled again to sleep, and then she ventured to alight to provide herself with some refreshments which would be needed

before they reached their next halting-place.

Paul had no return of his paroxysm, and when the diligence entered Brussels he was, to all appearance, quite well; but he had a strange, gloomy manner, which Marguerite had never before seen in him.

In Brussels they found lodgings in a retired street, and there they sat down to see what they would do with the life that had by such a strange fate become separate from everything in the past, except memory—and even that seemed more like the recollection of a dream than of a reality.

Paul had evidently received a shock from which it would be long ere he recovered—his nature was as much uprooted and shaken as his material life had been. All the moorings of outward life had been broken.

The change in his relations with Marguerite was as remarkable as all the other changes. Formerly she had looked up to him as to

a superior being; he was her guide—she relied on him as on a visible Providence, but now it was she who took the lead in all that related to their daily life. Paul took no heed to anything, he was plunged in a gloomy reserve, and Marguerite had no clue to what was passing in his mind. To her he was sometimes, though not often, abrupt and rugged. The temper is generally the first virtue that falls a sacrifice to any moral strife when a man is divided against himself, and Paul's temper had become extremely unequal, to call it by the mildest term. This, however, would have been easy to bear, but Marguerite felt that she had lost the power of making him happy; he had a deep, dull inner life where he brooded always, and into which she might not enter.

She easily obtained employment in works of embroidery, and her skill insured sufficient remuneration to remove from them all fear of want. As far as material things went

they lived in a plain, humble way, but not by any means without comfort.

Paul made no attempt to establish himself in his profession, nor to go amongst his poor neighbours. Sometimes he worked a little in the garden, but the main-spring of his life was broken, and the great energy of mind and body which had distinguished him seemed to be extinguished.

Marguerite's love appeared to have changed its character and to have increased, if that were possible, in its intensity; it is a poor love that always requires to be tenderly treated and fed on observances and pleasant words; true love is exacting of its right to bestow, rather than of what it might even justly expect to receive.

A woman's love has always a natural tendency to take the aspect of maternal tenderness—it is the great fundamental key to her whole being. Marguerite's love for Paul gradually assumed that of motherly care and

tenderness—which is the love which has most of all the faculty of “doing good, looking for nothing again.”

So time passed on—the winter was gone and the spring come back—no event had occurred to ruffle the peaceful monotony of their lives. No perquisitions had, so far as they knew, been made after them—their retreat was undisturbed or undiscovered.

One day, however, part of an old *Gazette de France* fell into Marguerite's hands through the simple chance of its having been used in folding up some work she had received. The strange fatality that guides things that concern us to our hands, by seemingly the most fortuitous accident, had been at work here; the fragment of newspaper contained the sentence of the Court upon Paul Crèqui, late Prior of the Convent du Petit St. Antoine, and upon Marguerite Simon de Méry, with whom he had unlawfully contracted marriage. The judgment pronounced

was, that Paul was to be first subjected to the torture, ordinary and extraordinary, and then to be hanged in the Place de Grève. He was to be carried to execution, holding in his hand a candle of two pounds weight, and he was to make a confession of his crime and ask pardon for the scandal he had caused to religion, before ascending the scaffold.

Marguerite was simply sentenced to be imprisoned for life, in the Convent des Filles Répenties. The children, being innocent, were to inherit whatever property there might be.

Marguerite was dreadfully shocked at seeing this intelligence. She had never realised that any proceedings would be taken against Paul, after he had made good his escape ; she had had no idea of the penalty that he had incurred, and although the danger had been fairly left behind, yet she felt much like that traveller, who, it is said, died of the fright of seeing by daylight, the precipice he had descended in the dark.

“What is that, Marguerite? give it to me,” said Paul.

“Oh, it is nothing—you startled me—I did not see you were in the room.”

“It is a nothing that has made you turn pale, and my being in the room is no reason why you should not do as I request.”

Marguerite gave him the paper without speaking.

Paul read it, and his face flushed with indignation—he flung down the paper with a look of scorn, and said:—

“It is a sentence at once iniquitous and unjust, there was no sacrilege—I am not a priest; there is no canon law which condemns a monk to death for breaking his vow of celibacy. But what is this further on: ‘The Sieur Paul de Crèqui having absconded, he will be executed in effigy.’ Pleasant, upon my honour! It is neither law nor justice, but a piece of ecclesiastical cruelty. In a civil court I should have fared better; but

no men are so utterly cruel as priests. We are well here, and out of the way of it all."

All that day Paul's spirits rose to a pitch of wild, mocking gaiety. He described the process of his progress from prison to execution, with a scornful, sarcastic wit, that made Marguerite shudder; he seemed to have a delight in dramatising the proceedings to the minutest incident, till Marguerite, pale and trembling, entreated him to desist.

"You are wrong, my child, a man ought to look his fortune in the face; it is seldom she allows herself to be so clearly discerned."

The next day Paul said:—

"Marguerite, the injustice of that sentence has reconciled me to myself. It was so cowardly to flee from the consequence of my own deliberate act, that nothing but the consideration of the pain it would cause to you, has deterred me from returning to France and giving myself up to the authorities to face my

trial. You do not know the degradation I have felt in being here—my name left behind as that of a detected criminal, and myself liable to be retaken by justice. Marguerite, you have had much to bear from me—I have not been ungrateful for your loving-kindness and forbearance; but I was not at one with myself—I felt degraded in your eyes—I had undertaken what I had failed to carry out—henceforth, however, you shall be satisfied with me. I date my life afresh from to-day.”

He walked up and down their small room for some time longer; at last, he stood still before Marguerite, and watched her as she bent over her work.

“Marguerite, I have not been good to you—let me hear you say that you forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive—I have suffered sometimes, in thinking that it was I who had wrecked all your life, and I feared

that I seemed like a bird of evil omen always beside you."

"Forgive that, too—you are the one true, pure, and precious fruit my life has yielded—I grafted your truth upon a falsehood—only the love that bound me to you was true—that remains—the falsehood to which I sacrificed you has fallen away—all I strove to save has been lost—all I dreaded has overtaken me—I am discovered and disgraced—you do not know what I have suffered in the idea that you must despise me."

"Hush, Paul—my husband—you are ungenerous; what must I be if I could see in all you have done aught but the love you had to me, and the heavy price you have paid for it."

Paul looked down into the depths of the true and tender eyes that were raised to his.

"May the rest of my life be more worthy of you. Henceforth, there will not be any

rival object to take half of it away from you, my Marguerite—my good angel—my wife.”

It was a moment of happiness that was distilled for Marguerite, out of all her past months of suffering.

CHAPTER XX.

PAUL, from that day, resumed in great measure his former habits and occupations ; he went abroad, he mixed with his neighbours, he obtained plenty of practice in his profession, he was good and kind to all who needed it, but the main-spring of his life was broken—the old self-spirit of indomitable self-reliance was no more—he had made a moral bankruptcy. He had never realised how great an element secrecy had been in his scheme of life, and the proud self-reliant man felt that he had failed in the integrity which he had taken for granted had been his. He awakened from a dream wherein he had acknowledged no judge but himself—no rule

of conduct but that of his own imposing, where he had been his own supreme arbiter of what was right or wrong, to find that in reality his whole life, for the last twenty years, had been a successful course of double dealing. His life was flawed; he had not been what he had *seemed* in any of the phases he had assumed. The disguise was stripped from the past. His power to reconcile discrepancies, and by the arbitrary exercise of his own force of character to make that right which in others would have been wrong, *now* seemed to him a snare and a delusion—a mockery—he had only entangled himself in the insurmountable difficulty of trying to make the crooked straight, and the result had been shame and confusion of face. He had been discovered. The sense of humiliation was terrible; he felt as Sampson might have done when he first knew that “his strength had departed from him.” There was a moral lesion in his

life which it was beyond his power to unite.

Marguerite felt the change, but she was helpless. Paul kept silence upon what was passing in his thoughts—he fancied it was lest Marguerite should suffer needless pain and fancy that he *regretted* his love for her, or that he laid on her the blame of what had happened, but in reality it was that he shrunk from speaking—he could not yet reveal that he was sensible of his defeat.

It was now Marguerite's turn to repay to her husband all the love and patience that he had once exercised towards her. She suffered at being excluded from Paul's confidence, but she recognised in this adversity of heart the opportunity to be steadfast to all she had felt and uttered in happier days when it had seemed as if no estrangement *could* ever come.

We fail those we love in their emergency, and those we love seem often to fail us,

because of some wound to our personality which draws off our thoughts to *ourselves*, and we fail to recognise the call upon our love until the occasion has passed away, and then we see the angel that came to us unawares, and which we refused to entertain.

Marguerite was patient, and found still deeper treasures of love in the depths of her own soul.

The head of the establishment for which Marguerite worked went twice in the year to Paris, and Marguerite had, by that means, contrived with great caution to send and to receive tidings of her children. Paul seldom spoke of them.

Three years passed over. They were now in quite prosperous circumstances.

One day Paul said :—

“ Marguerite, let us go back to Paris.”

“ Dear Paul, will it be safe? Suppose you should be recognised?”

“ It would not be safe ; it is very probable I shall be recognised, but for all that my mind is made up to go—I cannot live here skulking—it is too degrading—I must go and brave my fate, whatever it be—I will not escape the consequences of what I have done—I will live them out.”

Marguerite had a more than conjugal belief in Paul’s power to make everything come right ; her heart did not quail at the danger so much as might have been expected. Paul’s words were as a ray of light to her, and she saw a hope in them.

They set off to Paris the next day.

In the delight of being reunited to her children Marguerite forgot everything else. She had never seen her grandchild, called Paul, after its grandfather. There were numberless family incidents to hear—her eldest son was married—she had to make acquaintance with her daughter-in-law—the two younger boys were grown almost to young men. The hus-

band to whom Marguerite had given her daughter had been worthy of her trust in him—he had supplied the place of a parent right thoroughly—his affairs had prospered. In the tumult of the happiness of this reunion Marguerite for a moment thought less of Paul, or fancied that he must be as much engrossed as herself. She had never realised that Paul could feel humiliated before his children, or rather before his son-in-law.

But so it was. Paul's pride made those few days very bitter to him, and with the unreasonableness inherent in a man, he thought Marguerite extremely unkind to be so much taken up with the others as not to see the pain he was suffering.

However, he professed to himself that her children would console her for his loss, and he had the perverse, morbid pleasure which even the best men sometimes feel in tormenting a woman when they are sure that

she loves them with all her heart and with all her strength.

Paul had been nursing a devil in his heart for a long time—a devil in disguise, it is true—but one that had nevertheless worked him evil.

Paul and Marguerite had been a week in Paris. One of the sons came home one evening saying, “he had met M. Perrin, who seemed to be reconnoitering the house—a lame old man was with him—a very ugly-looking man.”

“Ah, yes! mine enemy hath found me; that lame old man wishes to be my evil genius, but I shall baffle him.”

Paul spoke quietly, and with a grave smile.

Marguerite looked tremblingly and anxiously at him.

“I am ready to go now,” she said; “we shall have time to make our escape—they do not know that we suspect danger.”

“There is no danger from them, dear

love—he tranquil—no man may elude his destiny, nor can any one go further than he is permitted.”

“ Oh, Paul! how can you offer such Mahomedan maxims as serious comfort, or as a reasoning hope? There is no common sense in waiting to be found and taken.”

“ No, dear friend, there is not—nor do I purpose so. Is all your faith exhausted? Can you not trust me to act for the best?”

“ I don’t know—I have a strange fear of evil upon me to-night.”

Paul seemed impenetrable to all fear or anxiety; he was in more cheerful spirits and more like his old self of years ago than Marguerite had known him since their flight.

The next morning Paul rose early, and wrote busily for two hours. After breakfast he left the house without taking any sort of precaution against recognition. He carried

in his hand a small portmanteau. Marguerite gazed wistfully upon him. She hoped he was going to escape, but she did not venture to speak. He kissed her tenderly and said—

“ You shall hear from me.”

Marguerite had so much confidence in Paul's powers of success that now that she saw him, as she thought, alive to his danger, she felt almost re-assured.

An hour after his departure, two officers of police, under the guidance of the lame man, arrived to search the house “ in the name of the law.”

Before they had proceeded far, a messenger came to bid them cease, as the individual they were seeking had that morning given himself up to justice.

It was quite true. Paul had gone to the præfecture of police and surrendered himself.

The police agents reluctantly retired, like

dogs called off when on the scent of their prey.

Days followed of anxious suspense.

M. Nogaret, the son-in-law, moved heaven and earth to obtain access to Paul, who was in strict seclusion, according to custom—neither friends nor legal advisers being allowed to communicate with prisoners who were once in the grip of justice.

Marguerite felt more keen womanly resentment than grief. The fact that her husband should again have kept a secret from her—have left her on the outside of his life while he was meditating such a design—was very hard to bear. She had hoped that their misfortunes had united them, and that there could be no more secrets or mysteries between them.

Paul had chosen to be inscrutable, and Marguerite felt that she had not been worthily treated—after so many years to have conquered so little of his confidence! She

was angry, too, that he had involved himself so wilfully in danger. In this disposition her son-in-law encouraged her, and bade his wife do the same. He knew better than either Paul or Marguerite the fearful entanglement in which he had involved himself, and he thought anger would keep up her spirits, and help her to support her grief.

CHAPTER XXI.

THERE had been both haste and informality in Paul's last trial; the sentence had been arbitrary and excessive. He had been tried as an ecclesiastic, which he was not; he had simply been guilty of a great breach of monastic vows and conventual discipline. For this he had been turned over to the secular power to be hanged, which stern duty had been duly performed—in effigy.

There was every reason why Paul should have a new trial before another court if he could obtain it, and there was every reason to believe, that when the true nature of his offence was known the penalty would be more moderate.

Paul had chafed at the thought of being “escaped from justice;” the morbid yearning of an exile to return to his native land had been nourished in secret till it became a fixed idea, and Paul returned to Paris to give himself up to the authorities and to stand a fresh trial if he could get one.

The course of justice in Paris was, until the period of the first Revolution, complicated and uncertain. The law differed in every province. In some places it was Roman law—in others it was local custom founded on Teutonic jurisprudence, which often not only contradicted itself, but the laws and customs of places a few miles off. Each court had its usages and precedents, “*la jurisprudence des arrêts*,” and a cause lost in one court might be carried into another jurisdiction a mile or two off. Every officer in every court was tenacious of his authority, and jealous of his privileges. The *conseillers de Parlement* were a most formidable body,

and to give one of them offence was a dangerous misfortune.

An appeal from any of the other courts lay to the thirteen Parliaments; occasionally by privilege and the *droit de commitemus*, even trifling cases might be brought before the Parliament of Paris.

The vexation and expense of floundering in this chaos may be imagined; also the small chance a prisoner had of churning justice out of this sea of confusion.

The proceedings in criminal cases were barbarous and unjust, almost beyond belief in these days. Prisoners were treated as criminals until they proved themselves innocent.

They were thrown into solitary dungeons, and were very often secluded for years, without being either brought to trial, or allowed to hold any communication with their friends or legal advisers.

They were interrogated in private, and

every effort was made to entrap them into rash admissions or confessions. Torture was often a preliminary to the proceedings.

There were courts where the *prévôt* might condemn to death and execution within twenty-four hours.

The prisoners were never confronted with their accusers, nor were they furnished with copies of the papers put in evidence against them, nor with a copy of the act of accusation; indeed, they were always kept in the strictest ignorance of the charges against them.

The testimony of two witnesses was necessary to a capital conviction; but several testimonies to *probabilities* were held to be equivalent, and the judges were bound on oath to condemn on such testimony.

When condemned the prisoner was transferred to the Parliament of the Province, whatever might be its distance, to receive sentence in a chamber called *La Tourelle*, and the sen-

tence was founded on the document which recorded his condemnation.

Into this bottomless pit had Paul, in the wounded pride of his heart, chosen to fling himself.

The chances of his being ever fished out again were, as the reader may judge, very problematical.

A long time ago, when M. Nogaret had been serving his time as clerk, he had done a good turn to a man, who afterwards became valet to one of the august body of *Conseillers du Parlement de Paris*; where the man was now to be found he did not know—he might be dead—or with more certainty he might calculate on his having forgotten the circumstance altogether.

He went in search of him, however, and found him still in his old place, and brought back the circumstance to the worthy valet's memory. The valet was quite willing to

show his gratitude to his old friend, especially as he bribed him as handsomely as though there had never been any gratitude in question.

M. Nogaret obtained an audience with the *Conseiller*—was admitted to speak to him whilst he was dressing. He explained his case and entreated for some means of obtaining admission to Paul's dungeon. The case was interesting—the *Conseiller* listened with urbane patience, asked several questions, condescended to look at the copy of the former sentence, and the certificate of the execution in effigy.

He shrugged his shoulders as he handed the papers back to M. Nogaret:—

“Being an ecclesiastical case the chance, nay, the certainty is, that the original sentence will be confirmed and executed, and the next time *not* in effigy. How a man, not mad, having once escaped, should come back for the sake of trying to escape again, is more

than I can comprehend ; but nature, human nature especially, commits incomprehensible freaks every day.

“The only chance for your friend is, to get him the privilege of being tried by a special commission—his old sentence might be changed for another with more show of justice in it. But my time is up—the court sits early to-day—I have the honour to wish you a very good day.”

Here the great man saluting the little man with affability, the latter withdrew with every sign of humility, and a sense of the honour that had been conferred upon him ; a moment afterwards, as he was standing in the ante-room, the great man rustled past him in full official dress, giving a word or a look to the individuals who had been in waiting to catch even these small crumbs of hope.

The last fold of his ample robe, and the last curl of his august *perruque* disappeared through the door. The attendants on the

great man's levée began to disperse ; only M. Nogaret lingered in the recess of a window, hoping to be able to speak another word to his friend.

A lacquey came up to where he stood, and requested him to follow.

In a small dingy apartment on the ground-floor, with dusty windows, protected by iron bars, M. Nogaret found his friend, and along with him a tall, pale, thin, middle-aged man, with a cat-like expression of face, and a curious, supple sinuosity of figure ; the head was bent forwards, the shoulders drooped, he gave the impression of a serpent endeavouring to stand on end. He was presented to M. Nogaret as M. Léonce, l'Intendant of M. le Vicomte de Valambrosa.

M. Nogaret bowed, and M. Léonce returned the salute, with a shade of superciliousness, like a very fine gentleman as he was.

"Well, my dear Nogaret, and what does the patron say to our case ?" said the valet, with friendly affability.

"He gives me little to hope."

"Ah! speak without fear; I have been interesting our friend Léonce; he already knows the facts and he has promised me his good offices with the vicomte, who has much friendship for him."

Thus adjured, M. Nogaret told what had passed. His two patrons looked at each other.

M. Léonce passed his hand meditatively over his chin, and then, with an air which suggested that he was imitating the manner of a nobleman giving audience, he said:

"If the lady, the wife of the person you mention will come to me to-morrow, I think I can promise that she shall have the opportunity to plead her cause with M. le Vicomte, who might lay her case, which is very interesting, before his majesty the King. Is she handsome?"

"She has been lovely."

“Ah, that will not spoil her case with the greatest personage in the realm—a handsome woman is always a successful advocate.”

M. Nogaret returned home, with the understanding that Marguerite was to be at the vicomte's hotel by eleven o'clock the following morning.

As M. Nogaret knew nothing of Marguerite's former relation with the vicomte, he was naturally much surprised at the great repugnance she exhibited to the scheme he proposed.

He explained, with emphasis, the utter hopelessness of Paul's case, unless the King could be moved to grant him a special trial. He enlarged on the horrors of his dungeon—his solitude—the impossibility of conveying to him any assistance, and the certainty that the former sentence would be executed—it might even be without the delay of a fresh hearing!

“It is enough,” said Marguerite; I will

go—but now I have need to be alone—I will be ready by the time appointed ; but until then let no one come near me.”

M. Nogaret and his wife believed that their mother wished to pass the night in devotion.

CHAPTER XXII.

HUMAN love has its seasons of darkness and eclipse.

The most faithful and most enduring love seems at times to become cold and extinct; its roots may yet remain in the soul, but all outward manifestation has died down out of sight. Nothing in life can maintain a condition of permanence and unchange.

Marguerite's heart was stirred by bitter thoughts that were now for the first time awakened. She seemed to have eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and her eyes were suddenly opened. She thought of herself with scornful compassion, and she saw

with cruel perspicacity the wrong that Paul had committed, and the weakness he had shewn; no feeling of love pleaded in mitigation, she was endowed with a cold, pitiless clear-sightedness.

If the vicomte had been treacherous, had not Paul been treacherous too?—had they not both been equally untrue and unjust to her in the most solemn relationship that man and woman can contract? She felt that she had been so true and they so utterly false, she revolted bitterly against the injustice she had met with.

As if that were not sufficient to fill up the measure of her bitterness, she had to undergo the humiliation of appearing before the vicomte to give him the double triumph of seeing her a suppliant to him, and, for the second time, a dupe, who had been degraded as well as deceived!

Marguerite felt on fire when this thought suggested itself. Was there then no truth or justice in the world? Had all her own love

and faithfulness been only helpless—useless folly? It looked very like it at that moment.

The recollection of Paul's estranged morose behaviour during the last three years came back to her memory, little acts and words which at the time she had forgiven or excused, sometimes not even felt; but now the sting of them was active, she despised herself for her own generosity, which looked like contemptible weakness; she seemed to be now for the first time taking a just estimate of Paul's character, she was in a period of revolt against all the tender loyalty she had borne him.

She walked hurriedly up and down her room, she could scarcely breathe for the quick beating of her heart, she pulled open the bosom of her dress and flung back the casement, the cold night air was grateful, but it could not calm the frenzy that possessed her soul.

She tossed her arms wildly about, her passionate southern nature like a wild beast bro-

ken loose from its keeper, raged all the more furiously for the subjection in which it had been held.

Marguerite was powerless beneath its fury ; at length nature could endure no more, and she fell to the ground like a stone.

How long she lay thus she knew not—when consciousness returned to her the new day was breaking.

It seemed as if a long life-time had separated her from the day before.

Her strength was utterly prostrated, but the storm had passed away.

She rose from the floor, cold and shivering ; partially undressing herself, she lay down in bed and fell into a deep heavy trance-like slumber, too deep to be called a sleep.

Marguerite was roused by the entrance of her daughter, Madame Nogaret ; for a moment she could recollect nothing—a dull, heavy weakness benumbed all her faculties.

“Nogaret is waiting, mother—it is very

near the time, he says, or I would not have disturbed you;—why, here is your window wide open! you will have caught a dreadful chill.”

“Oh no, I am quite well; tell your husband I will be ready directly.”

Marguerite was now quite calm and collected—she dressed herself with a strange numb indifference, except that she desired to complete the operation as soon as possible; a black stuff dress, a white lawn handkerchief confined on her bosom, with a black brooch—and fine ruffles of the same material, a ribbon of black velvet round her neck, to which was suspended a cross.

The last three years had left traces of care and age; but she was still a noble-looking matron.

Down stairs her daughter was waiting with her cloak and hood, and a cup of hot coffee. A coach was at the door; quietly, like one in a dream, Marguerite entered it—M. Nogaret

placed himself beside her — they neither of them spoke a word.

The coach stopped in the yard of the Hôtel de Valambrosa. M. Nogaret enquired for M. Léonce. He was at breakfast; but being moved by curiosity to see the heroine of a cause *célèbre*, he did not leave them to linger in his ante-room; for Léonce had become some one and somewhat, and he too had petitioners and worshippers of his own.

When M. Nogaret entered, leading in Marguerite, he received them with a profound bow; as he raised himself he looked at Marguerite; the recognition was mutual.

“Madame Marguerite! I was not aware that it was you whom I should have the honour to receive, I shall be enchanted to have it in my power to serve you.”

Marguerite, to whom of course the apparition of Léonce caused no surprise, did not feel in the least agitated; but with a stately dignity replied:—

“I should be glad, if M. le Vicomte would give me an audience for a few moments.”

“To be sure, certainly—he will be charmed and surprised as I am; he told me he would see Madame Crèqui when I mentioned her to him. Ten o’clock was the hour he named, I will send to enquire if he be already risen.”

Léonce rang the bell as he spoke, the stately imperturbability of Marguerite somewhat embarrassed him, he could not treat her as one who had come to ask a favour.

“Will you do me the honour to sit down, madame?”

Marguerite declined, and Léonce remained standing, wonderfully at a loss what to say or to do, that should be most appropriate to the situation.

The reply to the message soon came; M. le Vicomte was up; if madame would give herself the trouble to come, he would be delighted to receive her.

Léonce did not know whether he ought to attend Marguerite or not to his master.

Marguerite cut short his deliberation. She gave him a slight good morning and followed the lacquey.

"I think, M. Nogaret," said Léonce to that gentleman, who was preparing to go with her, "madame will do better alone. I am not sure that M. le Vicomte expects you; will you give me the pleasure of your company until she returns."

Léonce felt quite certain that neither his master nor Marguerite would wish for witnesses. He was curious too, to obtain some account of Marguerite's history, since he had lost sight of her.

The vicomte was lounging over his breakfast, playing at intervals with a little dog which rested on his knees, and glancing at the pages of a novel which M. de Voltaire had just published, called "Zadig." He was not much changed—his features wore a look of

dried, well-preserved juvenility — his figure was still graceful, and he still dressed and represented the character of *un jeune homme charmant*—but it required more pains than formerly.

He looked up when the door opened, and the lacquey announced Madame Créqui. He certainly had not expected to see Marguerite, but he advanced with polite alacrity.

“Madame, allow me to adore the fortunate chance which has procured me the pleasure of this visit—will you honour me by resting in this arm chair.”

“Monsieur, I am come as a suppliant, and I prefer to stand.”

“Ah! how amiable of you—to give me an opportunity to prove how entirely I remain your slave.”

M. le Vicomte possessed in perfection the power of impertinence which distinguished the young lords of that day in their intercourse with those who had no rank, and whom they

only considered human beings by a stretch of courtesy. He had no intention of being impertinent to Marguerite, but involuntarily he took a tone which indicated that she did not belong to his class.

Marguerite was conscious of this, but it did not wound her; there is no indifference so complete as the indifference of an extinct love—it contains no germ of future possibility—all has been exhausted.

“I did not seek you from choice. You are the only individual through whom I can reach the King, to entreat him to extend his justice and his mercy to my husband.”

“I am the more indebted to the adorable fate that drove you to this necessity,” said the vicomte with a bow; but Marguerite’s dignified gravity made him feel less at his ease than usual.

“M. le Vicomte, my husband had an unjust trial and an unrighteous sentence; he is not a priest; at the utmost he has only

committed a breach of monastic vows ; but it was not because he had done worse, but because he was so much better than the other monks in his convent that they hated him and compassed his ruin. Let him suffer for whatever he has done that is wrong, but let him have a just trial and a righteous sentence. I appeal to the King's clemency to grant him a trial before a special commission of judges of his own appointing, and I am come to you to entreat you to lay my petition at his feet and to obtain for it his august notice."

The vicomte remained silent—he was not pleased with Marguerite's pride—he desired to humble her to the level of her situation.

Marguerite knew the nature of the man she had to deal with—she had no thought of herself, but only of her object.

She advanced a step nearer to him and said earnestly :—

“ You *will* assist me in this matter. I do not appeal to you on any grounds of the past, though even that might give me some claim upon your help, but I appeal to whatever is just or generous in your nature ; for your own sake, do not lose the opportunity to assist an act of justice—let me think of you as one not altogether unlike what I deemed you in days gone by.”

“ You mean, then, that you will think well of me when I make it your interest to do so ? ”

“ If you do as I request, you will do right. You will use your favor with the King worthily. You will save a good man from an unjust punishment. You will in some degree atone for the wrong of having sent a brave man, who never injured you, to a dungeon ; and for the opportunity to do this, you will be thankful when you come to die. Miguel ! Miguel ! you have done me

ill enough—be gracious, and do this one good!”

The vibrating tones of her voice as she pleaded with him pierced his heart, frivolous and selfish as it was—the earnest, entreating gaze of her eyes—the noble humility of her bearing, gave a character to her beauty that impressed him with a sense of reverence altogether new and strange. She had appealed to all that was good in him, and she had awakened some dim, far-off echo to her words. He was under the influence of the strong, passionate, compelling will she had thrown into her prayer—which has power with Heaven itself to obtain its petition. She exercised a mastery over him which he could not resist—and he felt eager to do anything whatever to make her think well of him—the poor, pitiful devil which had been gratified by seeing her at his feet was completely quelled. He answered gently—almost humbly:—

“ Marguerite, I will do all you ask—I will send you word to-night how I have succeeded—I will do all that depends on me to move the King, and I will move others who have more influence than I have. I will speak to Madame de Chateauroux in your behalf—if I can interest her, your cause is gained. Indeed, I will do all I can to help you.”

“ Thank you, Miguel—I believe you.”

Marguerite turned to withdraw ; the vicomte conducted her with great respect to the door of the second ante-room where M. Nogaret was waiting for her.

As their coach was driving out of the court-yard a lacquey came running after them to say that his master had omitted to ask madame where he might wait upon her.

M. Nogaret wrote down his address and gave it the man. As soon as they had cleared the gates, he seized her hand and said :—

“Mother Marguerite, does all go well? I thought your interview would never end.”

“It must be as God pleases, but I think M. le Vicomte will help us to the utmost he is able.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARGUERITE was destined to endure many days of hope deferred. She heard nothing from the vicomte, nor could M. Nogaret obtain any intelligence; to his inquiries he was told that M. Léonce had gone into the country, and that M. le Vicomte was not visible; his other friend, the valet to the *Conseiller*, could do nothing to help him. M. Nogaret was at the end of his resources—he went out daily in the hope of picking up information, but it was a barren search.

The vicomte, to do him justice, had been

entirely in earnest in wishing to help Marguerite ; the impression she had made did not pass away with her presence.

He went immediately to the King's mistress, Madame de Chateauroux ; it was her dressing hour, and he had the privilege of *entrée*, for he was a great favourite with her.

Madame de Chateauroux was a good-hearted, kindly-natured woman, always willing to serve her friends in the most generous and disinterested manner, but she was so *étourdie*, and so entirely wanting discretion in her zeal, that she generally ran against her own design, and upset it in her desire to bring it about.

The vicomte was one of the best storytellers in Paris. He told the story of Paul, and the risk he had incurred in his great love for Marguerite. He made it very interesting—he spoke of Marguerite herself, and he made her interesting too ; but he dwelt with emphasis on the fact that she was over

forty years of age, and had sons, and daughters, and grandchildren. He excited his auditor's compassion by recounting the barbarous sentence that had been passed and executed in effigy. He did his part well. Madame de Chateauroux was enchanted to have so charming a romance put into her hands, that she might, like a good genius, make it end happily, and reward so much suffering virtue. Besides this, her empire over the King was tottering—she had rivals who were trying to circumvent her—and she felt grateful to the vicomte for this indirect homage to her power and favour. She loved the King—and the story of Paul and Marguerite, with its long-enduring love, touched her heart; she was glad that her royal lover should have so bright an example, though all who knew him, except herself, could have testified to the fact of his utter heartlessness. The boy who, at ten years old, could shoot his tame pet fawn when it came up for his caresses, could

not grow up to be a man whose sensibilities could be appealed to with success. But he liked to be amused, and she knew that too.

“But, vicomte, your story is too charming! Is it all true?—every word of it?—and is that magnificent Prior chained in a dungeon? It is a scandal! We must save him, and restore ‘Philemon’ to his ‘Baucis.’ Listen, I have a plan! His Majesty has promised to sup in my apartment to-night; I invite you to be of the party. I will call upon you to tell His Majesty that charming tale, and then I will fling myself at his feet, and beseech his mercy and pardon, and then we will send for Paul out of his dungeon, and he will come like Joseph before King Pharoah—he shall not know why he is fetched—he shall be made to think it is that he may be hanged, and then he shall be brought suddenly into my *salon*, well lighted, and whilst his eyes are dazzled with radiance, and he does not know whether

all be not a dream, Marguerite, who shall be waiting, not knowing what is to come, will catch sight of him, and rush into his arms, and she will faint with joy and surprise, and I will stand near, the witness of her emotion, and when she has recovered her senses I will speak to her, and give her a purse of gold, and bid them go and live happy without fear, and I will beg her to remember me in her prayers! Oh, it will be charming! And His Majesty shall be a spectator of their happiness. It will be like a play, and it will be all true! Oh, M. le vicomte, you are adorable!”

“No, madame, it is only you who are adorable. But in this case matters cannot go on so rapidly; it might embroil His Majesty in a difficulty with the church, if he were to set aside a sentence pronounced in a case of this kind without, at least, another trial; but if you would induce His Majesty graciously to order a special

trial before twelve councillors, then the charming programme you have sketched might be realised."

"But that would take so long," said the lady, "and I wanted it all gone through to-night."

"But madame, it is the only course to reconcile mercy with justice; the sentence will doubtless be very light, and a hint from His Majesty or from you would quicken the proceedings."

"How long would that tiresome trial take?"

"Perhaps it would be a week before it could be begun and ended."

"Oh! that is so long, I have no patience, I like everything to be now directly when I want it!"

"Most fascinating of women! you adopt the motto of your sex, but the week will soon pass by, if you deign to interest yourself at once."

“Of course; have I not told you to come to-night. But now you may go; I am busy.”

The vicomte perceived by her tone that she was getting tired, he feared she might fling aside her intention like a toy she no longer desired. He bent to kiss her hand and said:—

“Is it your pleasure, madame, that your gracious intention be kept a secret from Madame Crèqui, or am I at liberty to give her hope?”

“Of course not! the surprise will make the whole pleasure. Swear that you will tell nothing.”

“I am of your conspiracy madame the most faithful of conspirators. I am absolutely dumb; you alone deserve to have the whole credit, and to be the good angel of this unfortunate couple.”

The vicomte kept his promise to the

duchess. Marguerite was left without a word of intelligence—she suffered terribly—her passion of indignation had long since passed away; the tide of her feelings flowed in their right course, all thought of herself had gone like an evil dream, but she was powerless to help Paul further.

She wrote to the vicomte, but obtained no answer; she attempted to gain another interview, but she could never penetrate beyond the porter. Heaven and earth seemed to have equally deserted her in her need, the agitation and anxiety brought on an illness that for a few days threatened to be fatal.

It was the dead helpless silence that surrounded Paul's fate which was so trying. She felt that if she could only have known what was being done it would have been an immense relief; but then it would have spoiled the charming surprise and dramatic *dénouement* which Madame de Chateauroux pro-

posed to herself as the reward of her interference.

Whilst Marguerite was in despair her affair was making good progress.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE supper was brilliant in the Duchesse de Chateauroux's apartments. The vicomte told the story admirably—the King was amused—interested—and readily promised all that was requested; and there the matter would have remained if the duchess, who, with all her *étourderie* and flightiness, was really kind, had not pertinaciously claimed the fulfilment of the royal word. She besieged the minister also, and though neither King nor minister would have cared one straw if Paul had been hanged the next minute, yet the commission of judges was appointed and the case gone steadily into from the beginning.

It was a much longer affair than the duchess

had anticipated. Five out of the twelve members were dead against Paul; but the president was a Jansenist, and he had suffered for his opinions under the late King's reign, and been kept back in his profession; he was delighted to thwart sacerdotal influence. The gross injustice of Paul's former trial, and the excessive rigour of the sentence were patent to the most prejudiced eyes; but some of the judges were for making a signal example for the benefit of monastic discipline in general, whilst the others wished merely to pass a censure and some slight punishment for the irregularity and scandal. The president would have had him acquitted altogether.

The trial of Cartouche was going on at the same time, causing immense excitement. His adventures were dramatised and being acted in all the theatres. The president, in delivering his opinion, made skilful use of the incident, and drew an eloquent picture of the career

of the robber and assassin, contrasting it with the honorable and useful life of Paul, between *l'homme de rien et l'homme de bien*, and concluded by asking in the name of eternal justice whether the same doom was to be awarded to both?

The story of Marguerite's father had come out upon the trial—his great merits and unworthy treatment. He spoke of Marguerite, the innocent victim, and asked whether the daughter of such a father—a dutiful child and blameless wife was to be rendered worse than a widow, and to have the stigma of undeserved shame branded upon her fair fame.

There was great scope for eloquence, and the president made good use of the opportunity. His eloquence was not without its effect; it did not convert the five who were of the opposite persuasion, but it secured the waverers.

Paul was brought up to La Tourelle to

receive his sentence. It was that—he should make a public *amende*, holding a lighted taper of two pounds' weight in his hand, standing barefoot at the door of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, after which he was allowed twenty-four hours to leave France, not to return thither under pain of death. Marguerite was left free to accompany him or to remain with her children as she chose.

This sentence was certainly a most lenient one.

The judge had scarcely ceased to speak when the door-keeper placed a note in his hands; on reading it, the president bowed, gave some whispered directions, and Paul was led away down a winding stair, at the foot of which a door opened into a court-yard, where a carriage stood with horses harnessed ready to start; two men came forward and motioned to him to take his place, after which, they sat down, one on each side of him; the

blinds were drawn down, and they drove rapidly away. His companions maintained a rigid silence, and to Paul's enquiry whither they were taking him, no answer was given.

At length the carriage stopped, and Paul's companions intimated that he was to get out.

In the dusk of evening Paul could only discover that they were at the rear of a mass of building of stately appearance and great extent, and he was hurried through a small postern door across a court-yard, and up an outside flight of steps; three smart raps at a door in the wall caused it to be opened, and Paul found himself in a room hung with arras, furnished as a bedroom, and only lighted by a silver lamp. His companions did not come in with him—the door was closed behind him, and he could not see where he had entered.

Paul was not astonished, nor did he won-

der what was going to be done with him, it was like a dream. He remained alone some minutes, or, for anything he could have told, it might have been an hour, when he became suddenly aware that some one had entered the room.

An elegant-looking, though no longer a young man, in a court dress, with a blue cordon across his breast was standing looking at him.

Paul slightly started, the stranger smiled, came forward, and congratulated him with graceful cordiality upon his trial, and then added, in a bland, confidential tone. "A great lady, who has taken a deep interest in the proceedings, and to whose protection you are indebted for their fortunate termination, will see you; she bade me introduce you into her presence."

Paul bowed profoundly, but said nothing; he was like one watching a play. His companion touched a point in the arras, a door

opened, he entered, Paul followed and found himself in a brightly-lighted splendid-looking room. Several ladies were gathered in a group near the fireplace.

Paul's companion advanced, and addressed one of them, who seemed superior to the rest, a large, handsome, imperial-looking woman. She smiled with almost childish pleasure at whatever it was he said, and, giving him a little push with her fan, said :

"Vicomte! you are a *preux chevalier*, you have played your part admirably, it is all charming together. And that is the Paul I have heard so much about! Monsieur!" continued she, turning to Paul with an enchanting grace : "let me congratulate you on the issue of your trial. You have had friends who were very anxious on your account, you must come with me to thank His Majesty, who has interposed in your behalf. Ah! you would have had but little grace if you had been tried again

by those cruel priests." As she spoke, the folding-doors at the end of the apartment were thrown open.

A large, handsome man, richly dressed, wearing the cordon bleu over his heart, entered, followed by several gentlemen. No announcement was made, but the profound reverence with which he was ushered in, left no doubt as to the personage.

The lady hastened to meet him with graceful eagerness.

"Ah, sire! you are come in good time to taste the sweet reward of one of your good deeds; deign to allow one, whom your justice and clemency have raised from despair to happiness, the privilege of giving you thanks, as mortals worship heaven."

"Well! duchess, what is it?" replied her auditor, with a smile that seemed to mask profound indifference, enlivened by the hope of a little amusement.

"Ah! you are going to see two people

whom you have restored to life out of death."

She turned and made a sign to the vicomte, who led Paul forwards; the duchess took him by the hand, and said:

"Kneel, and thank the King! Sire, this is Paul, the monk, in whose misfortunes you deigned to take an interest; and this," continued she, stepping back, as Paul obeyed her injunction, "this is the faithful Marguerite, for whose sake he dared so much."

This was the supreme moment for which the duchess had laid all her plans; she had wished to see the surprise and the emotion of the sacred moment of their re-union.

Marguerite, who had been brought under the notion that she was to petition a great nobleman in favour of Paul, nearly fainted with sudden shock of finding Paul beside her; Paul quickly comprehended the situation; he saw that they had been brought there to give an emotion such as is sought for

in a theatre when good actors play their parts—he felt outraged that such a desperate reality should have been turned into a plaything, nevertheless he was not unmindful of the presence in which he stood, nor of the greatness of his obligations to the duchess.

The duchess was disappointed of her scene, for Paul exhibited no emotion; but she was charmed with the grave, respectful dignity with which he turned to her and said :

“Your grace has secured two hearts that will pray for your welfare, and for that of those most dear to you as for their own—it sounds like a very little thing, but it is the return which the Highest is pleased to accept from His people.”

The tone of Paul's voice penetrated the duchess to the heart—tears gleamed in her eyes as she replied fervently :

“Yes, pray for us, I feel sure that your prayers will be heard.

The King regarded Marguerite with curiosity, and said, as he raised her graciously :

“Madame, your beauty merited a better fate ; and then turning from her, “Duchess, do you give us supper to-night ?”

The scene had lasted long enough, but even as the King spoke it was announced that supper was served. His Majesty gave his hand to the duchess to lead her to table.

“I have a charming new singer to-night, who is also the most beautiful creature that ever was seen.”

The King replied by some *bannalité* ; they passed through an open door into a shining room, where a glimpse of a banquet, as of the gods, might have been caught ere the folding-doors closed and shut out the sight, both of the guests and the feast, from the mortals left behind.

“And, now,” said the vicomte to Paul,

“there is not a moment to lose; the carriage that brought you here is still waiting; it will convey you beyond the barrier—you must not remain an hour in Paris. As for the *amende* at the cathedral, the King will remit that, when your sentence is brought before him; your enemies and former judges will be furious when they know what is done; keep out of their reach, for the next time nothing can save you. You will find money and everything needful for your journey in the carriage. Madame, permit me.”

He gave his hand to Marguerite, and as he led her down the stairs, he said, in a tone that was almost humble:

“Marguerite, tell me that you forgive the past; since the day I saw you again I have felt a desire to hear you say that you no longer hate me.”

“Yes, Miguel, I do forgive you, and I feel very glad that—that you have made me do so.”

"Marguerite, I am very glad to have helped you in this matter; it was real help, for the danger was real. Whither do you go?"

"To Brussels."

They walked in silence till they reached the spot where the carriage was standing, on the opposite side of the court-yard. .

"Marguerite, when you are gone I will help your children; is there nothing else I may do?"

Marguerite shook her head.

The vicomte looked at her with an earnest, mournful gaze; the long-past youth of his life shone out so clearly, it looked so near that it seemed as though he might grasp it and drag it back into the present.

"Marguerite, Marguerite, think of me sometimes, no one in the world cares for me; you did once."

He grasped the hand he held, and raised it to his lips. He assisted her to mount into

the carriage ; Paul stood ready to follow. The eyes of the two men met ; for an instant they looked at each other ; the vicomte bowed with ceremony, and turned away to give orders to the coachman.

Paul exhibited no disposition to enter the carriage, but the vicomte, without again looking towards it, recrossed the quadrangle ; the coachman held open the coach-door, looking anxiously the while over his shoulder at the horses, which were not standing quiet. There was nothing else to be done ; Paul took his place, but the first words he spoke were :

“I would rather have died than owe my life to him.”

“Oh, Paul ! is that right ? Why should he be refused the opportunity to redeem the evil he once did ? besides, it is too cruel of you to say you would rather have died ; you could neither die alone nor suffer alone. I did not think that pain could enter into such a moment as this.”

Paul continued for a while moodily silent ;
at last he said :

“My Marguerite, forgive me ; you are nobler
and more generous than I. Perhaps some
time I shall forgive him, but just now I
cannot—let him go—the devil is in my heart
but I will fight him down ; is that enough ?
does that content you ?”

“ Yes.”

CHAPTER XXV.

THEY reached Brussels in safety.

Paul resumed his profession—a far wiser man than he had ever been in his life before. The evil demon was cast out that had troubled him. He had made himself and his appearances true to each other. There was no longer any strain to support and reconcile an anomalous position—he at length worked his life on its true centre—he had fairly endured all the consequences of his actions, and there was no longer a Secret that any moment might discover.

His character took fresh tone and vigour, his excellence became more simple and child-like; above all, the “angel grace” of

humility, the one quality he most lacked, was developed in him.

Marguerite was amply recompensed for all she had done or suffered; of course she would not have allowed that Paul was anything less than perfection before—but she found in him now a touching *human* equality and companionship which had not existed for her when his own strong will was the iron hand by which he held his external life together.

* * * * *

Fourteen years had passed since the events narrated in the last chapter.

It was Paul's birthday. All his children and grandchildren had come to Brussels to celebrate his *fête*.

There was M. Nogaret, who had become a great man in his profession; he kept a coach and a country-house, and considered himself as belonging to the *noblesse* of the robe. His

wife was still handsome, though her eldest daughter was on the point of marriage.

The eldest son of Paul and Marguerite had long been married; he was here now with his wife and their two children.

His two younger brothers were fine young men, and had every prospect of making their way in the world.

Paul had aged rapidly since his imprisonment; he looked a noble old man, with a grace and dignity of bearing which made people say—"How handsome he must have been when young." In truth, however, he was handsomer with the beauty of character, which is beyond all feature.

Marguerite's hair was now quite white; but her form was still erect, her step firm. Women who know how to grow old worthily need not in any way regret their lost youth.

There was to be a great *réunion* of all their friends and neighbours in Brussels.

The *salon* had been decorated with garlands of flowers, which had been sent from all quarters, till the old house was quite a Temple of Flora.

The young people had gone to dress. Marguerite was busy superintending her last arrangements for the evening.

Paul sat in his easy chair, which had been drawn up beside the window; the rays of the setting sun streamed across the floor, making the room look like a Rembrandt interior. M. Nogaret and Paul's three sons were sitting with him. It was after dinner, and a small table with dessert stood near.

M. Nogaret began to tell Paul all the gossip and news he had brought from Paris. The only points of interest to the reader were that M. le Vicomte de Valambrosa had fallen out of the King's favour, and had retired to his estates in Brittany, where he vegetated in the profoundest obscurity; he had no sons to keep his name alive,

and at his death his estates and title would go to a distant branch of the family.

M. Nogaret had waited upon him about some law business during the preceding summer, and he reported that the once charming vicomte had grown old and fat, and suffered much from gout in the hands and feet.

M. Léonce had become rich; he had married a widow with a good jointure, and some pretensions to good looks. She was distantly related to a family of the smaller gentry, and considered herself a leader of fashion in the province where M. Léonce had purchased a small estate.

The Convent of the Petit St. Antoine still existed, but it was not in good repute, its discipline was more lax than ever, and defied all the archbishop's edicts of reformation.

M. Nogaret spoke confidently of its dissolution at no distant date.

“Ah,” said Paul, “the days for monastic life have passed away—men must bring the church into the world, there to be the good leaven of reality and truth. It is in the world and amongst our fellow-men that our work lies; it is by our life in the world that we must do the work that is given us to do. When Christianity was young there needed nurseries of spiritual life where the sacred germ might be nourished and take a vital shape, to be in visible contrast with the hard, cruel despotism of the senses which Paganism had embodied. Human passions had grown rampant and monstrous, hence the scorn and mortification of the body, preached and practised by the early founders of monasticism. The body needed to be repressed, brought into subjection to a higher law—a purity of heart—of life;—self-pleasing was to give place to self-denial, as a higher and nobler condition. This was carried to a fanatical excess. Human nature was regarded as accursed, the

body was treated as vile and refuse, utterly to be contemned and despised, but God had made man, and his image was not to be despised—the balance had to be re-adjusted. Men are now required to perfect their relations with each other.”

“Then,” said M. Nogaret, “your conclusion of the whole matter is, that a man has no right to separate himself from the rest of the world, not even to bring himself to perfection, and cultivate without hindrance the good of his own soul?”

“Yes, that is my thought, neither by retiring from the world bodily, nor yet by keeping himself superciliously apart can a man think himself better than his fellows, and be blameless. All egoism, however subtle in its workings, or disguised in its aspect, is the one deadly sin that contains in itself the germ of all the rest. I speak from my own experience. Self-consciousness, the desire to bring my *me* to perfection that *I* might be

beautiful and grand, was the rock on which I split. I worshipped the ideal of myself, and endeavoured to realise it; but in the artistic pride of beautifying my life, I did not recognise how far I had gone from the straight simplicity of following after the thing that is right. I had disguised in fine names the common sins of pride, dissimulation, and telling lies, till my whole life was a tissue of double dealing; the essence of my error did not lie in the fact that I quitted my monastic life after taking on me the vows; but in the endeavour to seem what I was not. I was proud of the strength of my will which enabled me to carry along a double existence; it was not until I was found out and rudely exposed to the comments and contempt of men whom I had deemed my inferiors in the scale of humanity, that I recognised that I was no better than they, that they too were my brothers. I had been utterly *false* in all my dealings. After my escape I felt degraded

and I revolted against the humiliation of being discovered ; but in my dungeon I had time to meditate, to take home the conviction and to accept it. I felt glad of my exposure and utter ruin, because I was able to stand true once more. I thank God that He has granted me length of life to redeem the past, and that my sins have not been visited on my children."

At this moment they were interrupted by Madame Nogaret, who came into the room dressed for the evening. She lifted up her hands on seeing her husband.

"My dear friend! what *are* you thinking of? The guests will be here directly, and you will not be ready to receive them! Go! Go this moment, and be speedy!"

M. Nogaret obeyed, like a well-trained husband.

"And now, papa," said she, turning to Paul, "lean on my arm and come to the *salon*—it looks beautiful."

As they entered the apartment the

effect was charming; two large chairs at the upper end of the apartment, had been prepared for Paul and Marguerite, and here they took their seats.

The guests began to assemble, all the friends whom Paul had made in Brussels came to congratulate him on his *fête*; Paul and Marguerite looked on the gaiety, and were as bright as the youngest of the party.

“Dear Marguerite,” said Paul, laying his hand on hers, “we have now nothing left to wish for in this world. I wished that we might see our children all once more, and this night is the fulfilment of that wish.”

“Yes, Paul, I have another wish—that when it pleases God to take us He will take us both together, or that I may go first.”

“I should not be long after you. Oh, Marguerite, you have been the best wife and truest friend a man ever had.”

Marguerite looked at him gratefully and tenderly; such words are precious.

This was the last time they had their children all assembled round them together.

When they had both reached a ripe old age they died within a few weeks of each other. Marguerite was taken the first. Happy in the life they had lived together ; still more happy in that one was not left to mourn for the other.

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